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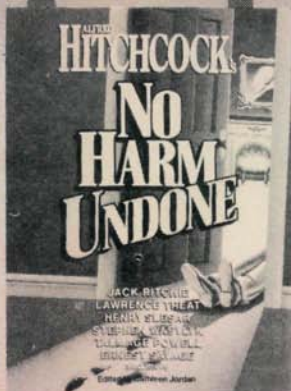
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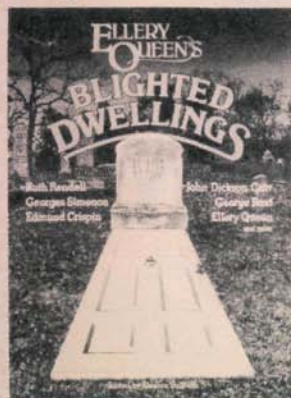
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

Alfred Hitchcock was a master of surprise, and it pleases us when we can maintain that tradition in AHMM. But surprises come in all kinds of packages, and this time we have some varied ones.

One is our cover story, which is definitely not a run-of-the-genre mystery. Nor is it the kind of story we had heretofore received from either Al or Mary Kuhfeld (the latter also writes as Mary Monica Pulver), or the two together. But we found it delightful from beginning to end and couldn't resist either the kidnapper or the sleuths.

As for surprise number two—many readers will remember the stories of Jack Ritchie that appeared frequently in this magazine and elsewhere for decades. Readers and fellow authors alike were grieved when Ritchie died several years ago,

and his stories—and sense of humor—have been much missed. It makes us particularly happy, therefore, to present a “first story” in our pages: that of Ritchie's son Steve, with his lighthearted tale “Post Mortem.” The beginning of a new tradition, we hope.

As it happens, we have another first story this time around, Charles J. Daudert's “Stewberry.” The author has recently retired from the practice of law, which he pursued for twenty-two years, in order to write; “Stewberry” is a highly entertaining debut.

Finally, the results are in for our special 30th anniversary Mysterious Photograph contest. Our hats are off to all those who so cleverly worked out stories that met the contest requirements. We wish we had space to run *many* entries.

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FICTION

A Specialist in Dragons

by Al
and Mary
Kuhfeld

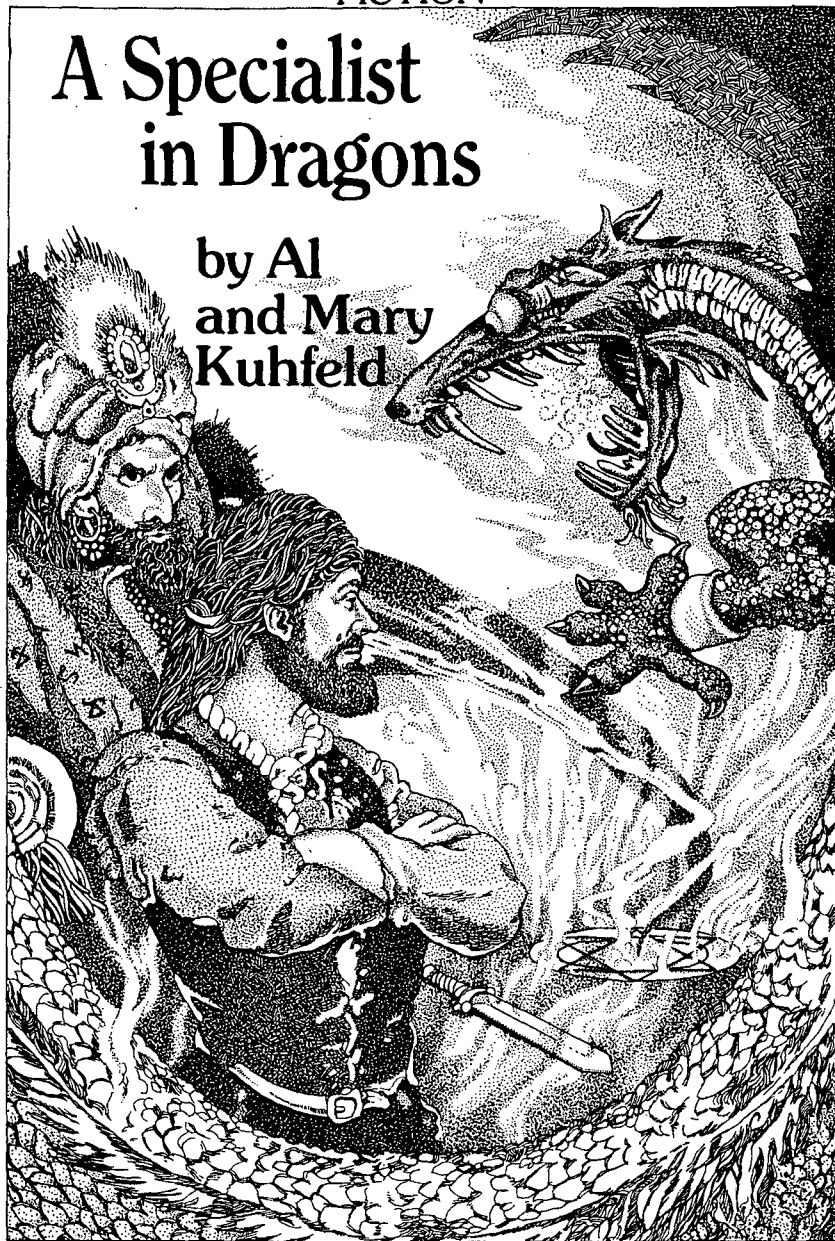


Illustration by Kurt Wallace

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It was a bright and beautiful morning, though it promised to be hot by afternoon. Baron Halfdan of Thorney was riding the fields on his destrier, visiting the peasants and checking on the crops. His pretty daughter Halla rode beside him on her brown mare, keeping him company. Since they were well within his lands, they had dispensed with the usual rattling company of retainers; they were alone together.

There was a sudden leathery flapping, and an enormous blue dragon alighted on the lane in front of them. Before Halfdan could react, the dragon snatched Halla out of her saddle with one large foreclaw. She screamed and kicked violently, but it ignored her. "You're Halfdan?" it hissed smokily.

"Yea! Release the girl, lizard!" roared Halfdan, drawing his sword and kicking his horse forward. He slashed at the dragon's claw, drawing purple blood in a great spurt that stained his beard and tunic, but the dragon ignored that, too. It leaned forward and bit the destrier's head off with a horrible neatness, then rose on its wings with a loud whap-whap-whap and disappeared over a copse of alders.

Halfdan untangled himself from the ruin of his stallion, cursing. He was a big man, with

more black hair on his body than was really needful or attractive; and the blood dripping off the hem of his yellow tunic did not improve his appearance. He looked around and saw the terrified mare lunging against her reins, caught on a thorn bush a few dozen yards up the lane. He trotted up to her, calmed her, and climbed awkwardly into the unfamiliar woman's saddle. It was indicative of his fury, anxiety, and need to find help quickly that he did so; but he cut across the fields rather than risk being seen riding a mare.

Halfdan hid her behind a neatly whitewashed cottage a few minutes later and went up the path to pound on the door. He glanced down at himself and hoped his gory appearance would not shock Wulfstan. But then Wulfstan was a wizard, probably used to far more horrible sights than a blood-covered mortal.

Halfdan wanted two things: his daughter back, and his sword healed. Already the dragon's blood had begun to eat its way into the metal. Wiping at the blood served only to spread it farther up the blade. Leg-Biter had been his father's sword, and his grandfather's. It was famous for holding its edge through the longest battles, and it was the most valuable weapon

the baron owned. He impatiently hammered at the door. What was the use of buying a wizard if he wouldn't answer his door?

Halfdan boldly lifted the latch and went in. The wizard's raven screeched in alarm, and flew to the rafters with a great clattering of wings. "Here, here!" it croaked. "The wizard is out. Have you got an appointment? Take two cups of wine and call on him in the morning."

"None of that, Hugin! Look at this sword! Dragon's blood, fresh from the dragon." The baron waved the weapon in the general direction of the raven. "He stole Halla. Get your master, and get him fast."

Hugin sneezed at the purple smell. He flew higher into the ceiling beams and crouched with his eyes shut.

"Hugin, I bought a very large cat at the fair last week," said Halfdan dangerously. "He's extremely fond of fowl."

"Yes? But my master's conjuring an elemental, and it will take a certain delicacy of approach."

"Delicacy be damned! Fetch him or I'll fetch my cat!"

The bird screamed, "All right, all right, all right!" He swooped down and out an open window. "Humans have no respect for a raven's feelings," he grumbled as he flew off.

The baron sat down and looked about. This was only the second time he'd visited Wulfstan's cottage since he'd acquired him last month. There were two rooms and a half loft. One room was a kitchen and the other, the bigger, was a clutter of shabby-comfortable furniture, books, and paraphernalia. Halfdan intended never to inquire too closely about. He briefly wondered where all the dust had come from; surely there was more than a month's worth?

He was studying a moth-eaten tapestry showing a wizard conjuring up a wind for a sea captain when Wulfstan came bustling in. "Sorry you had to wait, I was doing some lab work on the harvest weather. Your problem is dragons, Hugin said."

"Dragon, Wulfstan. I hope you can do something, and quickly." He displayed his sword, now badly corroded. "I wounded a dragon with this not an hour ago and look at it! And Halla—he took Halla away with him."

"Really?" Wulfstan produced a tablet and stylus from thin air. He was young yet, a very thin man with glowing dark eyes. His dirty blue wizard's gown had a smell of ozone about it and a peculiar pattern of holes burned into the sleeves. Despite the shabby robe—perhaps even because of it—he was

the picture of wizardly dignity. "What kind of dragon, my lord? Any special characteristics?"

"It seemed a perfectly ordinary dragon, maybe a bit larger than usual. Blue and silver. Not like those oriental things."

Wulfstan was taking quick notes. "What about your daughter? Did she provoke him?"

The baron thought. Fifteen-year-old Halla had his own imperious temper, and was perfectly capable of provoking a dragon if it seemed the thing to do. "No, we didn't see it until it landed. And once he landed there wasn't time. He grabbed her and asked if I were Halfdan."

"Hmmm. So he was specifically after Halla. Uh—is she a virgin, by chance?"

The baron was taken aback. "Of course! I've warned the neighborhood bucks about her. Playing alive for the first man who so much as kisses her. I'm saving her to marry to Baron Aethelwold." Halfdan combed his beard with his fingers, flinging bits of dried blood in all directions. "Decent sort, he'll treat her okay. But he'll die young of the apoplexy—all his line does—and she'll hold the land. . . ." His eyes had gone dreamy, but he suddenly jerked back to the present. "Why? Is it that important?"

"Halfdan, either the dragon's got a taste for young female flesh, or some wizard sent him after a virgin for a spell he's working. Let's hope for the latter."

The baron looked stricken by simultaneous doses of hope and despair. Wulfstan laid down his tablet with a serious expression. "We'll have to call in a specialist on this."

"Specialist?"

"A specialist in dragons. I'm just a general wizard, fine with elementals, healing magicks, and weather. But dragons are a bit beyond me. Fortunately, Marduk of Oxney is very good with dragons, and he lives nearby. He's expensive, but what specialist isn't? I'll call and check if he'll see us right away."

The wizard reached out and took a crystal into his hands. He gazed into it and his body stiffened, became outlined in a faint blue light. He stayed that way for quite a long time. Even a glowing wizard can be a boring sight after a while if glow is all he does; Halfdan sighed and picked up a small silver knife to take a closer look at the runes incised on its blade.

"My lord," the wizard said irritably, "can't you control yourself around blades? Now I'll have to re-consecrate that athame before I can use it

again." The baron started, looked guilty, and set the knife down. Wulfstan had stopped glowing and was once more aware of his surroundings.

"What did Marduk say?"

Wulfstan rose and began to strip off his robe, revealing tunic and hose beneath. "He wants us there as soon as possible. You go get us a pair of good horses while I pack some equipment." He began rummaging in a box of old phials; dust rose about him. "Quickly, please!" he said. "Every minute counts."

Within half an hour they were riding down Oxney Road. Baron Halfdan held the stained sword across his pommel, carefully wrapped in virgin wool according to Wulfstan's instructions. As promised, the day had grown hot; and after galloping some distance, they had to pull back into a walk to cool the horses. Halfdan moodily commented that it would have been nice if this expensive specialist could have conjured them into his presence. "I hear there's a wizard over Stowold way who can do that."

"Aelfric of Stowold is a specialist in telekinisis," Wulfstan explained patiently. "He once moved an entire castle for his owner."

"Yes? Well, why didn't you call him? Couldn't he bring Halla back to me?"

Wulfstan smiled grimly. "Yes, my lord. But summoning live persons without harming them is prohibitively expensive. You could sell this barony without meeting his price. I think we'll have to be satisfied with Marduk. Anyway, I'm doing the best I can to smooth this ride. If you'll notice, there's a shower up ahead, wetting down the dust. And see that small white cloud traveling with us, keeping off the sun? If you weren't riding with me, you'd be choking and sweating."

"Yes, sorry. I guess I'm distracted by all this." They continued in silence, each wrapped in his own thoughts. Halfdan was a little surprised at the strength of his distress. After all, Halla was only a girl. She was strong, bright, and witty, like her two brothers now being educated at Earl Edgar's castle. He'd saved Edgar's life in battle a few years ago, and this was Halfdan's price for the favor. The earl had no sons and his daughters were exceptionally homely. He might have to settle for a baron's son for them.

With such bright prospects, surely Halla was not very important. So why was his heart so heavy? Perhaps because he had felt no great need to exploit her and had allowed himself to know her as a person. And she was a chip off the old block, all

right. Poor Aethelwold would probably die years earlier than necessary unless he learned how to handle her. Halfdan smiled, then frowned. First, of course, they'd have to get her back.

Marduk's "cottage" was very nearly a small castle, with a crenelated wall and a high tower from which he could study the stars. To the left of the wall was a church with its graveyard, and to the right a forest; Marduk could gather his bats, toads, and herbs readily. In front of the gate Marduk stood waiting, wearing a robe of Tyrian purple with runes of power embroidered in threads of all the seven metals—even quicksilver, which moved and shifted but stayed nonetheless in its pattern. His long hair was gold and silver, and a small owl was perched on his shoulder.

Marduk invited them in and treated them to fragrant cups of something which, while hot, was nevertheless very refreshing. "I think I can help you," he said to Halfdan. "But it will be expensive."

Halfdan's heart sank. "How much?"

"Five ounces of gold," Marduk said.

"And what do I get for my gold?"

"I'll find out what dragon has your daughter, whether she's

alive, and what he intends to do with her. Then I'll be able to say more about what the rescue will involve."

Halfdan took five large coins from his purse, which Wulfstan had insisted he refill before they set out. He gave them to Marduk, who immediately led them to a large and very impressive hall. Two freshly-drawn pentacles were on the floor, linked by obscure signs in an ancient language. Marduk took the sword and balanced it upright on its point in the center of one pentacle; he stood the baron in the center of the other.

"Think of the dragon, every detail you can," the wizard said; then he froze Halfdan's thought with a quick stab of his wand. Facing the other pentacle, Marduk made a dozen quick gestures, at least half of which would have been grounds for battle if performed by anyone other than a wizard.

A mist formed about the dragon's-blood stain; the rest of the sword melted into the mist. In the pentacle a tiny dragon suddenly appeared, hissing and ill-tempered, with a bandage around its left foreclaw.

"You ain't got nothin' on me!" snarled the creature.

"Speak!" Marduk said. The dragon belched brimstone and turned its back. Marduk began to chant in a thin dry voice of

unspeakable things. The dragon hunched its shoulders and wrapped its head in its wings.

"Speak!" Marduk said again.

The dragon made a gesture in Marduk's direction that Halfdan found insulting, but Marduk only raised his chant to a higher level. The air in the room turned smoky blue.

In a few moments the dragon, smoking and bubbling like a leaky alembic, cried for mercy. "Lighten up, boss," pleaded the dragon. "I'll talk. I was only following orders. He woulda skinned me alive if I hadn't."

"No snivelling! Who would?"

"It was Zark, boss, Zark of the Golden Tower, he's behind all this. 'Go fetch me the virgin daughter of a ruling nobleman,' he says, and he threatens to stick me in the basement and heat his tower with me for the next three winters if I don't. So I took off and I hang around this tavern and I hear stories about this baron with a kid he won't let a man near, and I wait for him and grab the kid."

"Is the lady alive still?" asked Marduk.

"Well, I think so," whined the dragon. "I didn't stay around once he took her off my hands."

"If he's hurt her—" began Halfdan indignantly.

"Silence!" ordered Marduk. "Why didn't you kill the lady's father when he cut you with his

sword?" he asked the dragon.

The dragon hissed like a cold horseshoe plunged into cold water. "Zark warned me not to so I didn't, even though he like to took off my hand." The dragon held up the bandaged appendage.

Marduk looked at Wulfstan. "I don't like this," he said. "Zark is extremely powerful."

Wulfstan agreed. "We'll have to tread most carefully."

"Well, perhaps we can inquire further." Marduk made the magical gestures again, in reverse order. There was a tiny shriek from the pentacle as the small dragon melted away, leaving the sword to wobble for a moment, then fall. The stain on it had vanished, and the blade gleamed like new. That's something, at least, thought Halfdan.

Halfdan and the two wizards went back into the comfortable living room and Marduk served up more of the hot beverage, which he explained was a brew of roasted mountain berries from a distant land.

"Zark of the Golden Tower is a specialist in war," said Marduk. "I fear for your daughter's safety. His kind of spells tend to use up the ingredients very thoroughly." He thought. "The virgin daughter of a ruling nobleman. That sounds like a conjuring spell."

The baron bowed his head. "Will she die?"

Marduk said simply, "Perhaps it would be best to hope so. Warmongers play with devils and demons. Would you want your daughter to be given as a plaything to one of those?"

Halfdan's heart grew cold. "No, I suppose not." She was young and very pretty, and not a bad sort of creature, for a girl. She sang merrily and rode well, and had taken over many of the more wearisome tasks of running the barony. He'd miss her. "Can't we go take her? Zark's stronghold is only a few leagues from here."

Wulfstan said instantly—he didn't like switching owners too frequently— "No, no; I can't recommend going up against Zark. He's far too good at what he does."

"I agree," said Marduk. "I think we'd better call in a specialist in demons for consultation."

After a quick scan by way of a candle flame, they found that Beo of Lutetia was visiting Aelfric, the telekinesis specialist, so they called on Marduk's crystal and were invited over.

Beo was a splendid sight, if a trifle excessive in dress and manner. He was a short, plump eunuch in a flowing gown of red and gold, green and lavender, brown and blue, depending on

which side he presented. He was wearing a turban with a peacock feather held front and center in a golden clasp. Halfdan disliked him on sight. He didn't care for eunuchs, was beginning not to care for specialists. This one looked even more expensive than Marduk.

Marduk introduced Beo as one of the world's greatest practitioners in a demanding field. Beo giggled archly and eyed Halfdan's purse.

"Demanding' is the word for it," Halfdan murmured to Wulfstan with a groan. "The gods grant this oily clothes-horse knows his business as well as Marduk says."

With Beo was a tall, wild-eyed Arab in a tattered robe. "A colleague of mine," the eunuch said. "Abdul Alhazred, on a pilgrimage gathering material for a book he's writing. He's also a demonologist."

The wizards huddled, muttered, and conjured. Mists with glowing eyes of many colors appeared and dissipated. Under Aelfric's spells the transparent forms of other wizards appeared and gestured together with Marduk, Beo, and Abdul; while Wulfstan watched with sheer enchantment and Halfdan, in a daze, produced gold coins as demanded.

The room darkened and took on a sulfurous odor. More pen-

tacles were drawn, and demons came and went as great thundering invocations were made. Abdul Alhazred performed a conjuration that vaporized full seven pieces of gold.

At long last windows were opened. Fresh air and late afternoon sunshine stole into the great hall. The five wizards, and Halfdan, were alone. The wizards nodded together then came over to the baron.

Marduk spoke first. "Zark intends to make a Midsummer Eve sacrifice of your daughter to the Demon Lord Zabibbo, thus gaining command over all the demons in Zabibbo's legions. It is a long, complex, difficult, demanding conjuration, and none of us would dare attempt it, much less try to stop it. We are a little surprised that even Zark should attempt it. If the sacrifice isn't exactly as advertised, Zabibbo will tear Zark to shreds."

"The dragon was under orders not to damage you," Wulfstan put in, "because the orphan of a nobleman doesn't count. Zabibbo is an extremely particular demon."

"But this is Midsummer's Eve!" groaned Baron Halfdan, covering his face with his hands. "Can't we do something?"

"Well . . ." said Marduk, "you could kill yourself."

"Seeing as how we can't do

anything about the virgin end of it," smirked Beo.

Halfdan frowned. "I can't really see how killing myself would be much of a solution," he said.

"Perhaps it's not quite as bad as that," said Wulfstan, producing parchment, quill, and ink from thin air. "I'm only a general practitioner, but I think I have an idea." He explained what must be done.

"That shave-tail?" shouted Halfdan. "Never!"

But after a few minutes' thought about the shabby but comfortable castle that would nevermore ring with a merry voice, and a brown mare disconsolate in the stables, he sighed and took the quill in hand. Wulfstan dictated the formula. Fortunately the writing was brief, for Halfdan was more warrior than scholar. He scrawled his signature on the badly blotted page just as the sun was dipping below the horizon.

The instant he pressed his signet ring into the pool of wax, making the document legal, the air was rent with a distant hideous scream that grew louder until the room filled with an agonized orange color. The wizards paled and made furtive gestures. A darkness followed, one that devoured the orange light. A probing angry chill

crawled along Halfdan's bones. But the presence slowly left, and candles pipped into flame in the wall sconces.

A familiar whap-whap-whap was heard outside the window, in the courtyard. Halfdan ran to look out.

"Daddy!" shrieked a glad voice. Whap-whap-whap went the hurried dragon's wings back over the wall.

"Halla!" he shouted. "Are you well?"

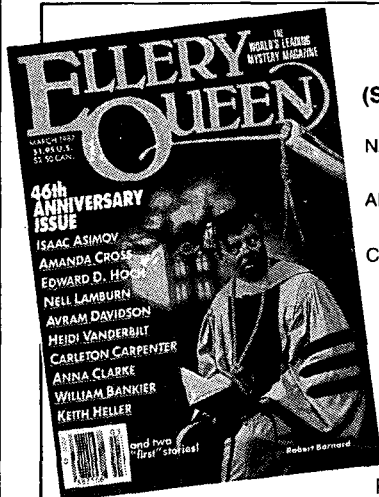
"A little smoky! Daddy, I've had the most interesting time! Wait till you hear!"

Halfdan smiled. Brave child. Good thing the marriage con-

tract was already signed. He'd have to move in with his son-in-law because he'd resigned his barony to his half-brother William in order that Halla no longer be the daughter of a ruler. William wouldn't want him underfoot, with his own ideas of how the barony should be run.

He wondered if Aethelwold would allow him to bring Wulfstan along. It had been the wizard's idea for Halfdan to resign, and a mind capable of such subtleties might prove useful in the years to come. For Halfdan did *not* intend to sit idle before Aethelwold's fire. . . .

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FICTION

A Matter of Possession

by Brendan DuBois

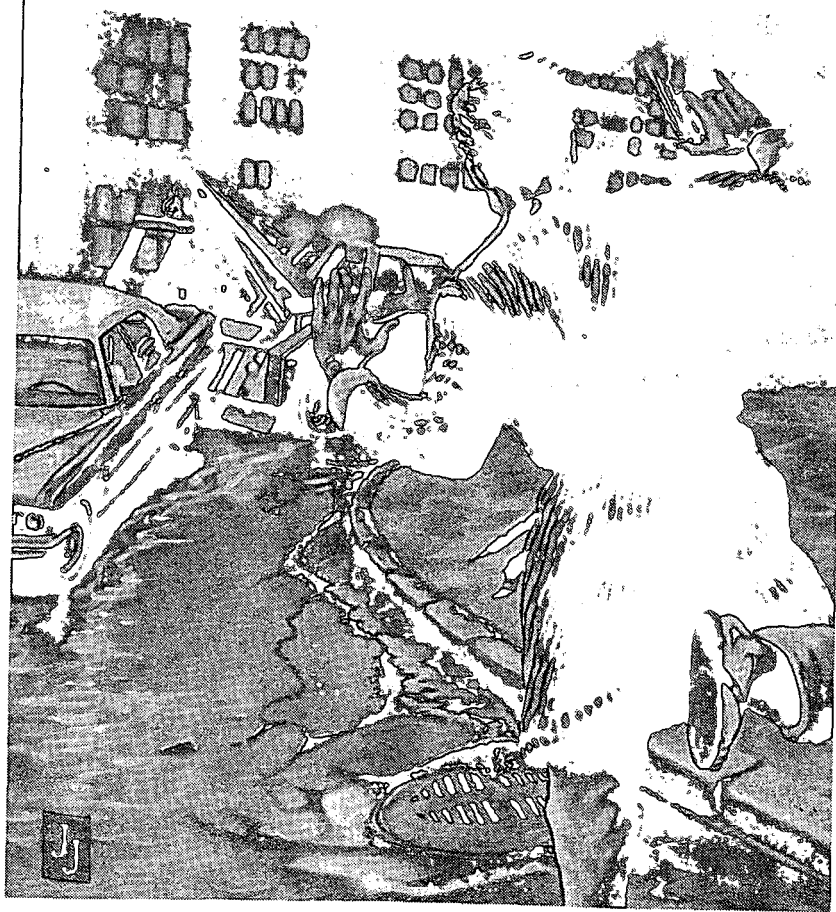


Illustration by Joe Jereda

Ross was the only person in the room who was smoking. He sat on one side of the scarred wooden table, a cigarette burning in his hand. It was late at night. He wasn't sure of the time. The room was small and had one door, and its walls were lined with some sort of thick plasterboard. There was an overhead light that sputtered and flared and there were two other men in the room. One of them wore a red polo shirt and gray slacks and had short blond hair, slicked back, and he never looked at Ross. The blond guy kept on looking at the tape recorder on the table.

The other man, who was sitting right across from Ross, wore a black suitcoat, white shirt, and black tie. He was sweating, and his dark brown hair and mustache were wet. He was the only one who talked to Ross.

"You can go on, if you like," he said, "about what happened last night, or you can tell us some more background information."

Ross shrugged, took another drag off his cigarette. It was either late Monday night or early Tuesday morning. It didn't matter much. He didn't have anyone at home waiting for him. He rubbed at his face with a free hand. Stubble, of all

things. He wondered if he could get a shave here.

"Are you all right?"

Ross said, "I guess so."

"I hope you don't feel any pressure."

"Pressure?" He snorted. "You don't know what pressure is until you've worked for Alan Kosten. I worked nine months for that nitwit, nine of the longest friggin' months of my life. You put in twelve hours and he'd want fourteen. You put in fourteen he'd want to know why you weren't working sixteen. You know, I saw his employment ad in the *Porter Herald*, and I never buy the *Herald*. I just picked it up 'cause I found it at some place I was getting my truck fixed, it was in the waiting room, and I saw the ad in the back. It said TOW TRUCK DRIVER NEEDED, or somethin' like that."

"So that was the first time you heard of Alan Kosten?"

Ross nodded, lighting another cigarette off the butt of the old one. "Yeah. Talk about fate, that day fate screwed me over. You see, I had my tow truck hocked up to its windshield wipers and I wasn't doin' too great as a freelance, you know? I had my name on the tow list for the town of Tyler and I had to wait to get called by the Tyler cops whenever there was an accident or a car

parked illegally, but there's almost fifteen tow guys on the list. And if you're not home or if you're out shopping when your name comes up, and you don't answer, then they skip over your name and get somebody else. So you spend a lot of time at home, and if you do get a tow from the cops, well, hey, forget about being paid the next day. You gotta submit a bill to the cops, and they give it to their secretary, and if she don't lose it she sends it over to the town manager, and then the selectmen gotta approve it—and they only meet twice a month—and if they approve it your bill goes to the accounting department and then you get paid. And by that time you gotta disconnect notice from the phone company 'cause you ain't paid your bill."

"So it was about nine months ago when you met Alan Kosten?"

"Yeah, sometime in January, I forget." He reached over and tapped the ashes off the end of the cigarette. "I answered the ad and talked to him for a while and I found out it was a repo business, he repossessed cars. Well, that didn't set too well for me but then he told me he'd pay me fifty dollars a car, straight out, plus all necessary expenses. And sure I was making fifty to a hundred bucks per tow

for the cops, but that was catch-as-catch-can. So I went over and talked to him and he had this scummy little office in a rebuilt gas station in Tyler, with a chained lot next to the building where he kept the cars. I talked to him for a while and God knows I didn't trust him from the first minute. You'd meet him in a minute and in those sixty seconds he'd be your best buddy, he'd put his arm around you, he'd offer you cigarettes or coffee or whatever, and you'd think you just found your long-lost uncle or something. He had greasy black hair and yellow teeth and he smoked worse than I did, and you know something, you know what he did? He picked his nose. In public. Cripes, I'm not much on public manners but that turned my stomach. And he also cleaned his teeth with a matchbook, with people sittin' there with him."

The man in the suitcoat gave a slight smile and rubbed at his mustache. "What were the arrangements then, between you and Mr. Kosten?"

Ross stretched his arms out. He'd been sitting here for some hours, but that blond guy on the right was still looking at the tape recorder, like the goddam thing was going to blow up or something.

"Fifty bucks a car, plus ex-

penses, just like I told you. Each afternoon I'd come in and pick up a bunch of assignments, you know, the paperwork, and I'd go out at night and scoop 'em up. It was simple, really, just let the cops know what you're up to, find the addresses, and nine times out of ten the cars would be parked right there, on the street or the driveway. Back up the truck, hook up the chains and gear, and bring it back to the office and put it in the yard. Some nights, the good ones, I could pop two or three. Not bad, huh? A hundred fifty for a night's work."

"It didn't bother you, repossessioning cars?"

Ross gave him his best what-me-worry? look. "It's not my problem they don't pay their bills. Besides, I'm not out there repoing cars 'cause I don't like the paint job on somebody's T-Bird. I'm out there for the banks, the finance companies. You wanna pin some guilt on someone, look at them. They're the ones that gave us the assignments."

Across from him the man took out a pen and wrote something down. "How long before you and Mr. Kosten started having difficulties?"

Ross laughed. "Difficulties. Yeah, that's a polite word. Difficulties. You mean, when did Kosten start acting like a rabid

dog, right? Well, it was maybe a couple of months ago, when things were going really well. Funny, you'd think Kosten would've lost it if things were going poorly, but it was the other way around. It was like he couldn't handle success. We were picking up the cars left and right, me and two other tow truck drivers, and one day I was in the office and he was in the can and I started, well, there were some papers on his desk."

The man across from him grinned. "You went through his desk?"

"No, I didn't go through his desk," Ross said defensively. "The paperwork was just sittin' there, and you know what it was? The billing, the bills he sent to the finance companies and banks; and you know what? He was killing them, I swear to God, you would not believe the bills he was sending them. Two, three hundred dollars a car, and he'd send along a phony two or three page report, stuff like we followed the assignee twenty miles before recovering the car, or it took us six spot-checks at the residence before we found the vehicle, and he sent all of this to the banks, even if it took us only a half hour to do the job."

"You didn't like that?"

"It wasn't a question of like, it was a question of fairness. I

was out at night, bustin' my tail and using my truck, payin' my own insurance and the like, and I got fifty bucks. Okay, maybe a fair price. But Kosten would turn around and bill that up to two hundred and fifty bucks. So, after payin' my fees, he had two hundred bucks left, and after payin' off the bookkeeper and some other office expenses, he had at least a hundred and fifty left, pure profit, pure gravy. So when Kosten came back up from the can I told him, hey, you know, I've been here six months, I'm doing good work for you, I'm gettin' the most cars than anybody else, so I think I should get seventy-five bucks a car."

The man wrote something else down on the pad. "He didn't like it, did he?"

Ross shook his head, part of him wondering why he didn't feel any pressure, any pain. All he felt was a certain weightlessness, as if some great burden had been lifted from him.

"Hell, no. I think Kosten was half-tanked anyway, it was Friday afternoon, and first he gave me the good ol' boy routine of, well, Ross, you are doing well, but the company as a whole, Kosten Recovery, well, we got burdens and responsibilities—yeah, like his bar and restaurant bills—and I can't see us giving you an increase right now. But be patient, in six

months, in a year, we'll review you again. And I said, Mr. Kosten, when you hired me you agreed that I'd get a raise in six months. And he said, show me the piece of paper that says that. I said; I don't have no piece of paper, I was relying on your word. And he said, are you callin' me a liar, you deadbeat?"

Ross took a long drag on his cigarette, seeing his fingers tremble. The blond man by the tape recorder held up his hand and quickly switched cassettes. Movement at last, he thought.

"It got worse from there," Ross continued. "Screaming and shouting and throwin' the phone around. He called me about every name in the book, and if it weren't for the fact that he owed me a couple of hundred I would've punched out his lights right there and would've walked away.

"As it was, Kosten always liked to show me this little badge, sayin' he was an honorary police officer or something in Tyler. He said he was good friends with all the cops in Tyler and if he ever had any problems, all it would take would be one phone call. Whenever he got drunk he'd say he could kill a nun and run down a school bus in Tyler, and he'd never be arrested for D.W.I. So if I punched him, well, I didn't know what kind of heat he could've put on me."

Well, the man smiled at that one and gave a half wink at the blond guy by the tape recorder, and then he tried to put a more serious look on his face. His hand touched his mustache again. He looked hot.

"You can go on," he said.

Ross rolled his eyes. "It don't matter much, I guess. It just got worse. I remember one night I was pullin' an old Caddy from one of the poorer neighborhoods in Porter, and it was a tight jam 'cause there was a telephone pole right there in the way. Well, I was jockeying the truck around, tryin' to make sure that the Caddy would miss the pole, when some freak comes chargin' out of the house, waving a handgun in his hand. Well, Kosten or no Kosten, I don't get hurt or killed for a car, damn it, so I floored that tow truck out of there, and the Caddy went with me, though I left part of the front bumper in the guy's driveway after it hit the telephone pole.

"Oh, the shrieking that Kosten pulled that day. Saying I was an idiot, I was gonna lose the bank that gave us the account 'cause I damaged the car. I said, hey, first of all, that Caddy was all rust and dents anyway. And second, I had a guy ready to stick a gun up my nose. And did Kosten care? 'Course not. Said I had damaged bank property, it was a

matter of possession, and for damaging bank property, he didn't care if there was a squad of-Kraut soldiers on the front lawn, shootin' at me."

He tapped-tapped the cigarette in the ashtray, which was overflowing with ashes and butts. Ross fingered the pack he had. Only one cigarette left.

"And it got worse?" the man asked.

"Oh, yeah, no doubt about that. Kosten was the one that gave out the assignments, and pretty soon I started getting the real skips, the ones where they've moved with no forward-in' and they've quit their jobs and you spend six weeks tracking 'em down, looking for the car, and then you find out they drove out to Arizona or something. And when that happened, you got zilch, nada. You only got paid if you picked up cars.

"So I was starting to feel a squeeze, and then my truck needed some transmission work, and I was gettin' in the hole again. Then the kicker, the thing about the quota system, that started up."

"What was the quota system?"

In a way Ross was almost enjoying himself, telling the story. He leaned forward over the desk, the burning cigarette in his hand.

"One day Kosten had a staff

meeting with the office help and the other repo guys. His staff meetings were always a joke and this one was no different. You know, he'd say that Kosten Recovery was in the trenches, like World War I—as if Kosten knew anything about history—fighting for its life. Or that we were in a big lifeboat, and we all had to pull the oars to survive. And another favorite was that the office was like a big salad, and that each part of the office had to contribute to the whole like different ingredients in a salad. So this meeting was held at 8 A.M., which meant that me and the other repo guys were practically half-asleep. Kosten basically said that we were now all on a quota system, meaning we'd get paid a straight two hundred and fifty a week, and in a month we'd be paid a grand. All right? But the thing was, we also had to pick up five cars a week, or twenty a month, to make a quota. Anything over the quota and you'd get paid fifty per car. Then he mumbled some other things and he passed around a sheet of paper for us to sign, and all it said was, I understand completely and fully the quota system at Kosten Recovery and I agree to abide to it forthwith or somethin' like that.

"Well, that was two months

ago, and that month wasn't a good one. Kosten was still handing me out crap assignments and I only picked up thirteen cars for the month. Pretty slow, I admit. So at the end of the month Kosten comes up to me and hands me a bill, for God's sake, a bill that says I owe him three hundred and fifty bucks.

"What's this for, I asked.

"'You didn't make your quota,' he said. 'You were seven cars short and under the quota agreement, you have to pay me for each car you didn't get. Seven cars equals three hundred and fifty bucks.'

"So I said, I don't got that money, and where the hell did that come up? And he took me into his office and showed me this agreement, about ten or fifteen pages of legal talk, which lays out the quota thing he was talking about, the whole thing about meeting your quota and stuff, and you know what was the last page?"

"I can guess," the man said.

"Yeah, the piece of paper I had signed. And he had stapled it to the other stuff, and everything was notarized and sealed and signed by attorneys, and he waved the agreement at me and said, 'I gotta legal document here, and you owe me three hundred and fifty.'

"So, of course I couldn't pay

it, and I was gonna quit, except you know in this state you can't collect unemployment if you quit a job, and I had all these bills. But then Kosten was deducting the money I owed him from my paycheck, and the second month was even worse than the first, and I was quickly losing it all. And Kosten was getting crazier in the office. Screaming and frothin' at the mouth, passing out drunk at his desk, that sort of thing. And it all led up to a lot of pressure."

The man across from him wrote something else down and looked up at him. The blond man was still staring at the tape recorder.

"And it all led up to last night, right?" the man asked.

Ross nodded, and then lit his final cigarette. The air in the room seemed a bluish-gray in color.

"Yeah, last night. It got to me, I guess, realizing that I was working for a psychopath, and the worst part was that I was working for free. It was real late, last night, and of course I didn't pick up any cars. Kosten's assignments were awful, as usual. So I was drivin' around Tyler and I decided, what the hell. A lot of deadbeats skip out on their payments, their bills, and go off to live in another state, and I knew I couldn't work for Kosten any more. My

truck was paid for, if nothing else, and I decided that was going to be the last night I worked for Alan Kosten and Kosten Recovery. I was gonna go back to my apartment, clean everything out, and start headin' south. But part of me didn't want to leave without gettin' back somehow at Kosten, at givin' him some of the grief he gave me."

He took a deep drag on the cigarette, slowly releasing the smoke.

"It was about two in the morning. I was cruising down at the Strip at Tyler Beach, where all the bars and motels and arcades are, and there it was, sittin' in a parking lot, just beggin' to be picked up. It was Kosten's Buick, a big blue car with personalized license plates, AK-1. Just sittin' there. And I looked at the car and I started giggling, and I remembered all the crap he gave me, all a matter of possession. So I figured, why the hell not. I got my truck in that lot and before you could spell repossession I had it on the hooks and out of there, and I drove around for about a half hour.

"Oh, that was a nice drive, very peaceful. At that time of the night the roads are empty and you're pretty much alone, and I kept on laughing, harder and harder, just thinkin' of

Kosten coming out of some bar, stumbling and swearin', and looking up and seeing that his car was gone. Oh, the cursing he'd put on, about those god-dam deadbeats . . ."

"Then what?" the man asked.

"Then?" Ross smiled. "Then I went down a dirt road and backed her into some water and let the chains go, and glub-glub-glub, away went Kosten's dream machine."

"Where did you dump it?"

Ross said, "I think you know, or you wouldn't have me here."

The man nodded and then got out of his chair, slowly taking off his black suitcoat, as if the heat was getting to him. Underneath his jacket he was wearing a shoulder holster and pinned to the leather was a police detective's shield.

"You dumped the car in the Exonia River. A couple of fishermen saw you, and we pulled

it out this morning." The police detective leaned over the table, his hands flat on the surface. "And you know what we found in the car, repo man?"

Ross slowly stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray.

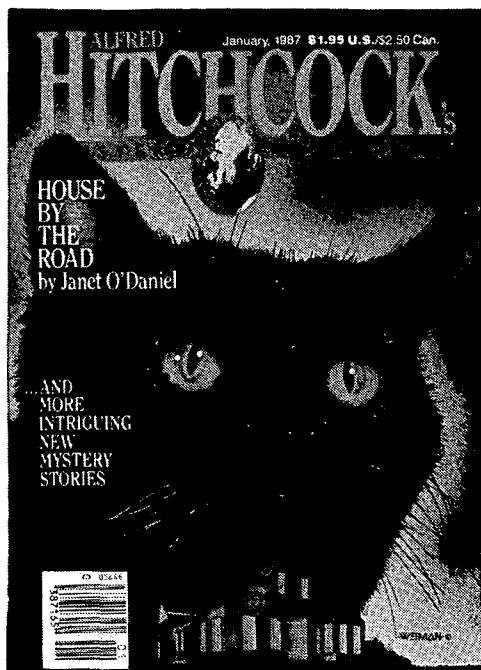
"Alan Kosten, I imagine, in the back seat, with all of the doors locked," Ross said.

The detective had a shocked look on his face, as did the blond officer by the tape recorder.

"You knew?" the blond man whispered, the first words he had said that night.

Ross shrugged his shoulders. "Of course I knew. When I was getting ready to drop the car into the water I saw him in the back seat, passed out." He looked at their faces. "What the hell. You heard what kind of person he was, what kind of things he did. What did you expect me to do? Wake him up and give him a ride home?"

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The Meek Shall Inherit the Earth

by Lawrence Doorley



Back in the sweet long ago, the 1920's and the 1930's, one of the more popular comic strips featured a woebegone character named Caspar Milquetoast. Timid, meek, apologetic—he constantly turned the other cheek—the poor fellow eventually found his way into the dictionary where he now cowers in cringe and quail along with such synonymical pusillanimity as milksop, jellyfish, mollycoddle, pipsqueak. Poor pathetic Milquetoast, he led a miserable life.

Socrates, the great Athenian, also led a miserable life, his wife Xanthippe having come down to us as the prototype of the quarrelsome, nagging wife. ("Didn't I tell you to take out the garbage this morning? And why didn't you feed the canary? And look at your sandals. Now you go right back outside and take off those sandals . . . right now . . . get." She nagged, nagged, nagged as the eminent philosopher came home at twilight after an exhilarating day in the Grove of Academe in zestful dialogue with his new pupil, Plato. Poor Socrates, the hemlock must have tasted like ambrosia. "Never ever again to hear that whining shrew. Thank the gods for small favors. . . . Gggguuuuullllppppppp. . . .")

It being a strange world where anything can happen and constantly does, it should come as no surprise to learn that back in 1956 Percy Walmsley, a genuine real-life milquetoast, married Olive Tubbs, a basic, querulous, high-powered nagger, Xanthippe resurrected. But unlike Socrates, Percy got a break, finally. He didn't have to resort to the foul-tasting hemlock. A hit man took care of Olive.

A "mother's boy," under her tender, loving, authoritarian thumb since 1929—he was ten years old when his father ran off with a third-rate, tassel-twirling stripteaser—Percy put in a year of mourning for his wonderful mother, who died in her sleep in 1955, before he ventured forth into the world of vamps and hussies, in this case a neighborhood church social. Percy was thirty-seven that momentous evening. He had last kissed a girl during post office in the third grade.

Olive was thirty-six that evening. Her last kiss had come during a spin-the-bottle game in second grade. She had been sheltered from the lecherous male sex by Dear Daddy, who took over her upbringing after her happy-go-lucky mama, weaving home alone from the corner saloon on a dark and stormy night, tumbled into an open storm sewer manhole and was quickly whisked out into Lake Michigan and never seen again.

For the next twenty-seven years Daddy, who worked the night

shift at Grotlyheimer's Brewery, warned Olive against associating with any member of the male sex ("The rotten bastards are only out for one thing, honey," said Daddy time after time), and had not Daddy, more than a little befuddled from his nightly overindulgence in the brewery's free beer, fallen from a fourth floor catwalk to the concrete floor below, Olive might have stayed secluded for the rest of her life.

But Daddy's untimely misstep changed things. There was enough company insurance to provide for an elaborate funeral with a few thousand left over. But by the time Olive crept warily down the two and a half blocks to the corner church social hall, her assets had dwindled to one hundred and nine dollars, a spoiled poodle named Trixie, and a TV set that operated eighteen hours a day. It behooved Olive to snare a tough, he-man protector like Daddy before the money ran out. Unfortunately for Percy, he happened to be the sole bachelor present.

It was spring, there was romance in the air. Long suppressed urges seethed and churned within Percy's tall, skinny body. He took one look at the chubby brunette kewpie doll in the frilly organdy dress and that was that. Somehow he found enough courage to approach the charming creature and ask if she would like a lemonade.

Some instinct told Olive that here was not one of the glib, slick-haired lounge lizards that Daddy had warned her against and she said yes, she would like a lemonade, her soft, sweet, little girl voice sending delicious chills up and down Percy's diffident spine.

They were married in June, Olive desperate and Percy smitten giddy by the commodious bosom, the cute childish voice, the discount store perfume that Olive poured over herself every time Percy was due to call.

They spent a four day honeymoon in Hollywood. Trixie went along ("You don't think I'd leave her in a kennel, do ya?" snapped Olive, the cute little girl voice turning mean and nasty). Most of the honeymoon was spent with Olive and the leashed Trixie dragging poor humiliated Percy hither and yon in a futile effort to catch even the slightest glimpse of John Wayne, Gary Cooper, Clark Gable, three of Olive's many heroes.

And in the evenings, in the motel—Trixie had been sneaked in and warned to be quiet as a mouse—every time poor trembling Percy made as if to commence to begin to start the simplest of preliminary husbandly rites, Trixie would absolutely have none of that.

"Ggggggrrrrr," she would go. "Ggggggrrrrr," hackles rising. Olive took Trixie's side.

"Listen, Percy," she said in tart tone during a TV commercial on the third night, "Trixie's been my protector for years an' years. It's gonna take her a while to git usta you. 'Sides, I'm all pooped out from all that runnin' we done."

That took care of the honeymoon, a total disaster for Percy and a bitter disappointment for Olive, aware that not only hadn't she gotten a John Wayne, she had ended up with a Mickey Mouse.

Back home in the western suburb of Chicago, in the neat two story, six room house that Percy and his hardworking mother had paid for, Olive took over his mother's room, Trixie moving in with her. That left Percy back in his old room.

Oh, once in a great while, Olive, when she wanted something expensive, like a new twenty-five inch TV, would indicate to Percy via coquettish smirks and girlish giggles that now was the hour. Poor Percy, it would have been better for him if he had become a monk because Olive insisted that Trixie remain in the room during the . . . ah . . . incident.

"She's promised me she won't look, Perce," Olive giggled, "Hee . . . hee . . . ho . . . ho . . . now come on, don't be shy, be a big boy."

God help me, God help me, Percy used to moan after these infrequent . . . ah . . . incidents. What am I going to do, what am I going to do, what am I going to do?

There was ample justification for Percy to appeal to a Higher Power, for Olive turned out to be: a high school dropout, a horrible housekeeper, a rotten cook, a sloppy dresser, a voracious snacker (popcorn, cookies, peanuts, candy, potato chips, etc., etc.), and a constant, incessant, perpetual nagger.

That wasn't all. She was a hypochondriac who didn't trust doctors. She treated herself via the TV commercials, and one of Percy's first duties was to build another cabinet in Olive's bathroom to accommodate the sleeping pills, the analgesics, the laxatives, the liver pills, the creams, the ointments, the sprays, the expectorants, the antacids, six or seven different brands of elixir, the decongestants, and God knows what else. Shocked at this enormous array of over-the-counter pharmacological heterogeneity, Percy made cautious haste to ask Olive if . . . "is your . . . ah . . . does your doctor know that . . . that . . . you are using all these . . . drugs? . . . Does . . ."

Olive interrupted him.

"I ain't got no doctor," she snapped. "Daddy never believed in them. And he was right. 'Sides, you think I'm gonna let a leerin' male sex man see me naked, huh?"

God help the poor man, Percy thought, without really thinking . . . it just hit him.

"Anyways," she went on, "I ain't gonna waste my time sittin' in no doctor's office fer two hours past when he was supposed to see me. Think I'm gonna miss TV jest to sit there, huh? An' there ain't nothin' no doctor kin tell me that I ain't seen ten times on TV. Now quit stallin' and build that there cabinet."

Oh my, oh my, dear me, dear me, whimpered poor Percy, what have I gotten into?

What indeed. More revelations were on the way. It turned out that Olive owned a half dozen or so well developed phobias. The main one, it took precedence over everything, was scelerophobia, fear of robbers, of crime in general.

The cabinet finished, Olive had another project.

"Okay," she said, "that cabinet hain't too bad fer you bein' such a rank ama'tr. How you on locks?"

"Locks?"

"Yeah, locks. We gotta have more locks on all the doors, and the windows. And I wanta peephole in the front door. I ain't gonna take no chances on no rapist sneakin' in, claiming he's from the electric company. A girl's gotta think'a her virtue."

Sick at heart, aware of his limitations, Percy called a locksmith.

Thus it was with an even more hangdog expression than before that Percy took the commuter train into the Loop, where he worked as an associate actuary for a life insurance company. And, of course, his co-workers, amazed that meek old Percy had finally taken the plunge, made that first day back a miserable one.

"Well, Casanova, how's it feel to be a married man?" his immediate superior greeted him. "Looks like she kinda wore you out, Perce . . . ho . . . ho . . . ho . . ."

Other co-workers were even more egregious, their comments ranging from the vulgar to the obscene. Poor Percy, head down, cheeks flaming, plunged into the work that had piled up on his desk during his absence ("Oh, give it to Perce . . . he'll get it done . . . you can't overwork old Perce").

The years crept by. Olive nagged, nagged, nagged.

"I want a fence put around the whole yard," she stormed at Percy during the first month of the marriage. "Anybody kin walk right into the yard as easy as pie. An' I don't want Trixie mixing with

none'a the mongrels on the street. An' I'm gettin' sick'a washin' the supper dishes . . . you do 'em from now on."

Poor Percy. He had a chain link fence put around the yard. The neighbors on either side, friends for years, felt affronted and gave up trying to be friendly with Olive. And stopped speaking to Percy.

But soon there were new neighbors. Olive kept track of crime. And as it slowly slithered out to the once crime-free suburb, she demanded that Percy sell the house, move farther west, out of the crimeridden area.

Poor Percy, by the time he retired in 1984 at age sixty-five, they had moved three times, he was commuting thirty miles to work, and one more move would have put them in sight of the Iowa line.

And all the while nag, nag, nag. Why didn't he make more money? How come he, a college graduate, was nothing but an assistant actuary (he had been promoted in 1978)? Why did he let the neighbors' leaves blow onto our yard? Why did he waste our money feedin' the birds? Why this; why that, huh?

Poor Percy, did he ever think of fighting back? Often. But since he had about as much backbone as an asparagus plant, every single time he steeled himself, determined to stand his ground, not back down, he always wilted. For it is difficult to change a milquetoast, difficult but not, as it turned out, impossible.

It is springtime 1985 in Madisonville, a lovely small city in the Mid-South nestled in the foothills of the Appalachians. Percy, Olive, and Dixie (Trixie is long gone, as is her successor, Mixie) are living on Beechwood Lane, a nice, quiet treelined street of thirty houses—fifteen on either side—that ends in a cul-de-sac. Madisonville had been located by Percy, using the enormous resources of the life insurance company before he retired. The city met all the requirements laid down by Olive two years before Percy was due to retire.

"It's gotta be a small city, somewhere's where crime ain't taken hold. An' me and Dixie don't wanta go too far south where it's hellish hot in the summer. An' we're sick'a the cold weather up here in the North. And be damn sure the place's got a good TV cable system."

Percy came up with five or six places.

"Okay," said Olive, heaving herself from the front room sofa. "We're gonna check out them places. Time you took off some time anyways."

They checked them out. One had a fat-bellied chief of police.

"That fat slob sure as hell ain't much of a ad fer crime an' punishment. Hit the road, Perce."

Percy hit the road. Another lovely little city didn't have cable TV.

"Let's go," snapped Olive. They went.

A leafy town with a pretty little park alongside a murmuring stream seemed the perfect spot. It wasn't. All seemed well—"Looks like this is it," Olive said after two days of thoroughly checking things out. But driving back to the motel she spied a long-haired chap in tattered clothes standing on a corner waiting for the traffic light to change.

Olive was furious.

"Look at that hippie," she stormed. "Look at him. . . . On dope sure as hell . . . that's it . . . any town what'd allow such scum ta walk the streets ain't fer us. We're leavin'."

They left. Finally they came to Madisonville. Spent three whole days in the city. It seemed perfect. It had a population of thirty-five thousand. The chief of police (Olive went to the police station personally, she didn't trust Percy) looked like John Wayne and even talked like John Wayne ("Yes, ma'am, you kin rest assured Madisonville don't put up with no riffraff. We're a law and order town"). The climate was salubrious, not too hot, not too cold. The cable TV system provided twenty-two stations including WGN, Chicago. And, best of all, an enterprising female real estate agent, sensing a quick sale, showed 2 Beechwood Lane, a perfectly maintained Cape Cod bungalow at the beginning of the street, right under a street light.

"It's in an estate," the agent explained. "The heirs are anxious to sell. It was owned by a little old widow who only drove it to church on Sunday." A little joke that went over Olive's suspicious head but which Percy acknowledged by a shy little laugh.

So they put down a deposit, went back to Illinois, sold their house there for a profit. ("See," needled Olive, "I told you we'd git eighty-five thousand fer it . . . where the hell would you be without me, Perce, huh?")

Of course they had to have a fence put around the yard. And though the little old widow had obviously been apprehensive about robbers—she had stout locks on everything—Olive had Percy add more locks.

"I guess that takes care of everything, Olive," said poor old Percy when the last lock had been installed by the locksmith.

Nope. Olive found a serious fault. Unlike their last neighborhood

up north, the new street did not have a neighborhood crime watch. Olive ordered Percy to get down to the police station and tell the chief to send someone around to establish one.

"Oh, Olive, please," implored Percy. "We just got here . . . can't it wait a while. Besides, don't the statistics show that crime is . . . well . . . it's nothing to worry about."

It was no use. On occasions like this when Percy, because of his extreme reluctance to inconvenience anyone, balked even a little bit, Olive raised her voice and screamed. Poor Percy.

About three days later a tall, steely-eyed sergeant with deep blue eyes and a firm chin—he looked exactly like Gary Cooper—came out to Beechwood Lane and went from house to house explaining what a neighborhood crime watch entailed.

Be alert for suspicious characters. Be on the lookout for anything out of the ordinary. Before going on vacation, alert your neighbor to keep an eye on your house. But never, never attempt to apprehend a suspicious character. Call the police.

Practically everyone on the street, except the Widow Ferguson and Olive, said they didn't see the need for the crime watch, but they all said they'd go along with it. Thus the following week a two man crew erected a thirty-six by thirty inch white and green metal sign on an eight foot metal pole at the beginning of Beechwood Lane, directly under the corner street light. The sign read:

**THIS AREA PROTECTED BY
MADISONVILLE POLICE—PHONE 911
NEIGHBORHOOD CRIME WATCH**

"Okay," said Olive when she and Percy drove back from the supermarket and saw the sign, "I kin relax now, knowin' I'm safe from robbers an' rapists. An' of course if I had to wait fer you to take care of these things, I'd be dead an' buried by now, huh?"

"Yes, Olive" was all poor pathetic Percy could murmur, but inwardly he was moaning, moaning, moaning; will it ever end, will it ever end; dear God, will it ever end.

Now, we all know that the Almighty moves in mysterious ways. And of course it would be bordering on blasphemy to imply that Divine Intervention had anything at all to do with Percy's finally achieving such a joyous state that the only possible way of ending this brief look at melancholy humanity is to borrow a lovely little phrase from childhood fairy tales: "And They Lived Happily Ever After."

Since They Lived Happily Ever After is, as above, the way this story ends, and since by the spring of 1985 the odds that poor miserable Percy would ever be part of a Happily Ever After were at least forty to one—hell, they were a hundred to one—then one certainly has to pause and wonder who, what, deserves credit for the mysterious intervention that turned things around when all seemed lost, done, finished, gone forever.

And where do angels come from? That's right. Percy saw the angel on the first night in Madisonville. Ever since his marriage, it had been his duty to walk the dog at night. Oh, every now and then, once in a blue moon, Olive would reluctantly tear herself away from the TV and make a big to-do about taking over the dog walking for that particular evening.

"Time I got a little exercise," she would say with a straight face, meaning it. "Gotta take care'a my girlish figure, right, Perce?"

Poor Percy. He somehow managed a choking reply, thinking, Dear Lord, she's got at least two girlish figures, maybe two and a half.

Anyway, that's merely inserted to further demonstrate the dismal depths of total, complete despair that Percy inhabited. Many times he used to tell himself that come the final accounting he probably couldn't handle Hell but he was absolutely certain Limbo would hold no terrors. He really thought things like that. He was an odd chap, a deep thinker. He had always been an omnivorous reader and marriage to Olive, whose reading consisted of supermarket scandal sheets, had done nothing to diminish his reading.

Back to the angel. Percy was walking Dixie. It was a night in early April. There was still a little chill in the air, but there was also a full moon rising and faint little waftings of springtime fragrance from burgeoning buds on trees and shrubs.

Percy and Dixie had walked from 2 Beechwood Lane, at the beginning of the street, all the way down to the cul-de-sac, and while Dixie was sending a stream of territorial imperative against the trunk of a beechwood tree, Percy was thinking, Oh, what a beautiful night, what a lovely night, why, why must I waste springtime after springtime, why . . .

His bitter thoughts were interrupted by:

"Woof . . . woof . . . woof." Percy looked up. The moon was rising in the east, down the street. Its silvery rays illuminated the shiny grey hair of a tiny creature in a white pants suit who wore a white shawl around her shoulders. With the moon creating a halo around her head and the scarf looking like wings, Percy's first thought

was, My goodness, she looks like an angel. And that's exactly what she was, a sweet, dear, lovely little widowed angel.

The dog came into view, pulling the angel behind him. It was Henry, a tan and white cocker spaniel. Henry was outraged at Dixie for having infringed on his private sphere.

"Now, Henry, you behave. . . . Stop that barking . . . please, Henry, be a gentleman, please," came the soft, pleading voice as out of the shadows of the street light, with moonlight behind her, appeared Martha Ferguson. Her hair was neat, shiny, and clean-looking. She had a lovely little face, with only a few small wrinkles. Her perfume had a mild, wistful scent. She couldn't have weighed over one hundred pounds. Truly, an angel from heaven.

Thus it was, under less than auspicious circumstances, that two kind, decent, shy, lonely people met one another. Martha had been a widow for two years, and Percy had been in bitter thrall for nearly twenty-nine years. Henry, the spaniel, was six years old and a spoiled brat. Dixie, the poodle, was nine years old, and a spoiled brat. But had there been no Henry, no Dixie, "They Lived Happily Ever After" would have come a cropper once again, as it nearly always does.

There was another dog walker in the vicinity that moonsplashed night. It was Joey O'Malley disguised as Joseph Smith (he had vehemently vetoed the F.B.I.'s suggestions of Farnsworth, Kovoloski, Melon, Turpinseed, Mitts, Pitts, and Ritz, plus a dozen other noms de plume). Joey and Sammy, his fifteen-year-old black and white mongrel, had been moved into a small house on Dogwood Lane by the F.B.I. under the cover of darkness a month before Percy, Olive, and Dixie arrived in Madisonville. Each night Joey had walked poor old half-blind Sammy down Dogwood, left on Laurel, a through street, down to the street light at the corner of Laurel and Beechwood Lane, then back home, always carrying a .32 caliber revolver hidden in a shoulder harness under his jacket.

One does not have to be clairvoyant to have figured out, by the end of the above paragraph, that there is more than a hint of foreboding in that paragraph. Why in heaven's name (there's that Divine Intervention again) would the F.B.I. be sneaking someone with a nom de plume into a lovely little city like Madisonville under cover of darkness?

It happened like this. Joey O'Malley, expert hit man for a large metropolitan crime syndicate back east, awoke one morning in the late summer of 1984 to find his right eye in violent turmoil, with flashing lights and many, many floating black cobweb-like objects.

"Jesus Christ," he moaned to Sammy, his old dog, "I'm goin' blind. Black spots . . . flashing lights . . . jest happened . . . right now . . . God, Sammy, what a rotten break . . . how come it has to happen to me, huh . . . why . . . why me?"

Sammy, carefully stretching his arthritic old bones in the huge chair opposite Joey's bed, emitted five or six sympathetic barks.

"Yeah . . . yeah . . . that's right, Sammy," exclaimed Joey, calming down just a little, "an eye doctor . . . yeah . . . that's the ticket. Maybe it ain't so bad, maybe it's jest old age . . . Jesus, Sammy, it's hell to grow old . . . hell. . . ."

"Woof . . . woof . . . woof," ("Well, that's life") went Sammy, deeply sympathetic, for he adored Joey. And no wonder. Joey adored Sammy.

It took Joey four days to get an appointment with an ophthalmologist. The verdict was retinal detachment.

"What the hell's that, doc?" asked Joey, very apprehensive.

"The retina is a delicate layer of light-sensitive cells that lines the rear three quarters of the eyeball," the doctor explained.

"There are blood vessels beneath the retina," he went on. "These vessels provide the retina with nutrients and oxygen. Retinal detachment occurs when the retina lifts away from the choroid, the blood vessels."

"Is there any hope, doc?" asked Joey, trying as he might unable to keep the whimper from his voice.

"Oh, yes, Mr. O'Malley, there's plenty of hope."

The operation was scheduled for a week hence. Meantime the eye had to be bandaged. Two days before the operation was due to be performed, The Boss sent word out to Joey to appear at headquarters. Cursing his luck, Joey reported.

"What the hell, Joey," exclaimed The Boss, a cadaverous seventy-year-old with white hair, a long, nasty nose, no chin, a gravelly throat. "What the hell's the matter wid yer eye, huh?"

"Well, boss," stammered Joey, squirming in his seat across the desk from The Boss. "It's like this . . . ah . . . I got a what-ya-may-callit, detachable retina . . . ain't that a laugh . . . ha . . . ha . . . hee . . . hee . . . hee."

Well, The Boss didn't think that was one bit funny. In fact he looked grave, funereal, more hideous than usual. Joey's heart skipped five quick beats.

"Gee, Joey," The Boss said finally, "that's bad, real bad. And I can feel for you . . . yeah . . . I had the same damn thing three years ago—comes with old age, Joey. One of the best eye doctors

up in Boston took care of mine, Joey . . . I can see good as new, good as new. But, Joey, this comes at a bad time, a real bad time. I got a job for you . . . big time job . . . yeah. . . . It's gotta be done right now, right now, Joey, can't wait. And, Joey, it don't look like as if I could trust you to handle the job. No offense, Joey, but what if you missed? By the way, Joey, how old are you?"

"Sixty-two, boss," gasped Joey. "But I don't feel like it . . . honest, boss. . . . I keep myself in good shape—and, boss, I can see perfect outta my left eye . . . real good, boss."

The Boss shook his thin-skulled head, white hair flopping about.

"Nah, Joey," he said gravely, "I can't take a chance. This is too damn important. We got word that the person . . . ah . . . the rat . . . well, it looks like the Feds are gettin' ready to pull him in, and the kinda rat he is, he'll make a deal. We can't afford that, Joey. . . . We been able to stay aheada the Feds for twenty years . . . and I'm too old, Joey, to go to jail. So, Joey, how you fixed for money, huh?"

"I'm okay, boss, okay," answered Joey, a frog in his throat, butterflies in his stomach. "You always paid me good, real good, and I appreciate it, boss . . . I sure do . . . and I . . . well, after the divorce . . . I been savin' money . . . puttin' it into mutual funds. I'm okay, boss . . . you don't have to worry about me . . . but, boss, once I get this eye fixed . . . you gonna let me . . . ah . . . take up where I left off?"

Why, sure, sure, sure, The Boss promised Joey.

Joey was barely out of the door when The Boss rang for his first lieutenant, Johnny, a tall, lean, dark-haired, handsome, thirty-year-old apprentice killer. Johnny could hardly believe his good luck.

"That's it, Johnny," The Boss concluded. "Take care of Joey. I got a funny feelin' 'bout Joey, a funny feelin'. First place, he ain't no good to us no more. And then he's gettin' up there, gettin' old. Next thing you know he'd be wantin' to retire. Nobody retires, Johnny, from the Organization, nobody . . . but the hell with this kinda talk . . . get Joey . . . and mind, he ain't to suffer. You got that, huh?"

"Yessir, boss, yessir," exulted Johnny. "You can count on me. I been waitin' fer this chance to prove myself to you for years . . . you kin count on me, boss . . . I ain't gonna foul up."

"You better not," snarled The Boss, suddenly feeling his own age; poor Joey, poor Joey, too bad things had come to this.

Johnny fouled up. Too eager to prove his mettle, he rushed out

in the wee hours of that very night to Joey's nice two story, six room house in the suburbs (Joey had moved from the city years before—after the divorce—to avoid the high crime rate in the city). And while using a glass cutter on a side porch window to get at the lock inside, Johnny allowed a little thin sliver of glass to fall onto the floor below. The sliver made a wee tinkle, tinkle, tinkle; three soft tinkles, so soft that Johnny did not hear them.

But upstairs Sammy heard them. The hoary old half-airedale, half-collie, snoring peacefully in his chair, came awake. His ears raised. His spine quivered. He growled, low, menacing.

Joey heard the growl. He awoke. He sat up in bed. He reached under the pillow for his .32 caliber revolver.

"What's goin' on, old boy, huh?" he whispered. Sammy growled again, jumped to the floor, emitted a low "ouch-ouch" pathetic whimper.

"Come on, let's go," Joey whispered. "Lemme go first." That was fine with Sammy.

Several of the neighbors heard the shots. They phoned the police. Sirens wailed. Lights flashed. Two hours later Johnny had been hauled off to the morgue. A grumpy veterinarian had arrived with his ambulance to take care of Sammy, hit in the rear end by one of Johnny's wild shots.

"How's he gonna be, doc?" implored Joey as Sammy, moaning and whimpering, was carefully loaded into the ambulance.

"Looks like he'll be all right," replied the vet. "It appears to be nothing more than a superficial wound."

"Take care of him, doc," pleaded Joey. "He's all I got . . . me an' him's been together for fifteen years."

That done, Joey was escorted into the back seat of one of the police cars. The chief of police sat beside him.

"Well, Joey," the chief said, "you did pretty damn good for a half-blind . . . ah . . . person . . . but it don't matter . . . looks like we finally got the goods on you . . . yep, finally. The Feds are gonna love this."

Joey didn't answer. In fact, he didn't hear. He was seething, boiling, furious, outraged. How dare The Boss do this to him, to faithful Joey O'Malley who never once in all the years—hell, in over thirty years—ever let the Organization down. I oughta kill The Boss, he thought, cut him up, choke him, beat him to a pulp. Imagine sending that rat Johnny out to kill me . . . and Johnny shootin' poor old Sammy . . . poor old Sammy.

"Poor old Sammy," moaned Joey, the words just coming out. "Poor old Sammy."

"What's that, Joey?" asked the chief of police.

But again Joey didn't hear him. Them rotten bastards, fooled them, didn't I? Me an' my one eye . . . them rats . . . who they think they're foolin' wid . . . huh . . . damn them to hell an' back . . . I'm gonna' show 'em they can't make a fool outta Joey O'Malley.

Joey wanted a deal, right now, quick. The D. A. said he'd rather the F. B. I. handled the case. Joey said he didn't give one damn-it-to-hell who handled it. The chief agent of the F.B.I. for that district was jubilant. Here at long, long last was the break they had been waiting for. Finally there was going to be enough solid evidence to bring The Boss and the rest of the Organization to trial.

The chief agent, after a hurried check with Washington headquarters, agreed with Joey's demands: immunity from prosecution; the F.B.I. would buy his house; he and Sammy were to be well protected until a grand jury was convened.

"But first I wanta go to Boston and get this eye taken care of, right?"

Yeah, sure, sure, Joey.

"And after the . . . ah . . . after I testify, I wanta . . . you gotta find me and Sammy a nice, quiet, crime-free place somewhere's halfway down south where it ain't too hot, nor too cold . . . Sammy's gettin' so he can't take . . . ah . . ."

"The extremes of temperature, Joey?" suggested the chief.

"Yeah . . . that's it . . . mind ya, I ain't goin' ta Miami . . . nor Dallas . . . nor New Orleans. None of them places what's too hot and what ain't safe for ordinary human beings, right?"

"Right," said the chief, "I understand. Now tell us what you know about the Organization."

Joey talked for five straight days, naming names, dates, killings, dope deals. After that he and Sammy, his rear end heavily bandaged, were flown to Boston under heavy but inconspicuous guard, and a noted surgeon performed the delicate operation (a procedure in which the vitreous humor between the retina and the choroid—the blood vessel—is drained away, allowing the retina to sink back against the choroid and regain its blood supply. Then the hole in the retina is sealed via a laser beam). The prognosis was that Joey's vision in the eye would return to normal in about two months.

A grand jury was hastily convened. Joey testified for a week. Indictments were brought against The Boss and sixteen members

of the Organization. Bail was set unusually high but not high enough: all of the indicted were out on bail two hours after the indictments. A huge backload of cases would prevent the trial from being held for at least seven or eight months. Meantime, though the grand jury proceedings were secret, the media had no difficulty in identifying Joey O'Malley, former hit man, as the informer. Joey—he and Sammy secreted in a rural hideaway fifteen miles from the city—demanded quick action on the move down south.

Joey had reason to be concerned.

The Boss's heart was heavy. He called Nickie, a short, ugly, vicious, thirty-two-year-old to his office.

"My heart's heavy, Nickie," The Boss said. "You can't trust nobody, nobody. To think Joey, after all I done for him . . . he was like a son to me, Nickie. To think he'd . . . I don't know what's happened to loyalty, Nickie . . . gotta be the divorce rate . . . the breakup of the family . . . no stability . . . no foundation. Joey's a divorced man, Nickie . . . he ain't got no one to . . . well . . . and there's TV, Nickie . . . all the killin' . . . and the rapin' . . . the shootin' . . . the world's one rotten mess, Nickie . . . one rotten mess."

Nickie, a family man, still married to his childhood sweetheart (he never beat her up more than two or three times a month), agreed wholeheartedly. Things were going to hell. It was awful.

"Yeah," agreed The Boss, getting down to business. "Now listen to me, Nickie, listen good. I want you to get Joey. We gotta get him outta the road before the trial. Understand . . . I don't care how much money it takes . . . jest git him . . . you got that?"

"Yes, yes, yes sir, boss, I got it. But . . . boss . . . ah . . . well . . . you know . . . can I . . . ah . . . kinda hire me a investigator . . . one a them private eyes to . . . kinda help . . ."

"Ya can hire the U. S. Marines," snarled The Boss. "Joey's gotta go . . . money ain't no object . . . jest so . . . you don't try to screw me, Nickie, remember that."

"I sure will, boss," exclaimed Nickie, turning pale. "I sure will."

Joey, his eye much better, and Sammy loved the new house. It had been completely furnished by the F.B.I. (the old place up north had been sold as is, the F.B.I. refusing to let Joey go near it). It had been owned by a grumpy widower who had mysophobia—he hated, despised, abhorred dirt. The place was spotless. In perfect condition. The lawn, both front and back, was smooth as velvet. And not one single dandelion grew anywhere. There were trees and shrubs, and they were perfectly trimmed. The roof was new,

the plumbing glistened and gleamed, and the neighbors weren't one bit nosy.

Best of all, Madisonville, as determined by the F.B.I., had the lowest crime rate of any city of comparable size in the whole U. S. A.

"But that doesn't mean you're safe from your old outfit, Joey," the chief agent warned Joey as the chief and his men prepared to sneak off before dawn on the night they brought Joey and Sammy to Madisonville. "They'll be after you. It's vital that you remain as inconspicuous as possible. As I told you, we can't provide any more protection. It'd be too obvious. You're on your own. Try to stay alive at least until after the trial."

"Yeah, sure," snarled Joey. "Sure . . . and don't forget the two thousand cash every month, right?"

"Right. We won't forget."

It is May in Madisonville. It is the time of birdsong, buds bursting, warm murmuring breezes. The air is a heady blend of spring-time fragrances. There is an enormous full moon every single night, an astronomical miracle (actually there have been only two full moons during the month and a half Percy and Martha have met for their wonderful, wonderful, divine fifteen minutes of dog walking). It seems to them that the moon is now always full, the stars atwinkle every night (it has rained at least five nights, not hard, a misty drizzle) and that Beechwood Lane is strewn with gold and silver (it is really not, being an asphalt street).

Percy has bloomed. He has straightened up to his full, unstooped six feet two. He talks confidently, brilliantly, of current events, of old songs, of famous people, of ancient civilizations, of popes and presidents and potentates. He has gushed forth under the adoring gaze of dear sweet little pretty Martha.

"Oh, Percy," she said one night toward the end of May, "you seem to know everything . . . just everything. Your wife must be proud of you. . . . I imagine you two have some very stimulating conversations."

"No, we don't," Percy replied—a month ago he wouldn't have answered that way. "Actually, Martha, we seldom talk. We just . . . we don't talk very much."

"That's too bad, Percy," said Martha, meaning it, a fine person. "I'm so sorry."

"Don't be, Martha, don't be," replied Percy, all excited. "These moments with you . . . and . . . Henry and Dixie . . . have been the happiest times of . . . my . . . entire life. . . . I mean it sincerely,

Martha . . . from the bottom of my heart. Have you . . . have you enjoyed it, Martha?"

"Oh, Percy . . . how can you ask that . . . you must know that I have . . . it has been . . . I've been so happy, so happy . . . just you and I and . . . the dogs . . . and the sky and the moon, and the stars . . . and the . . . oh, Percy."

Look out. Olive, devouring the TV and her snacks (she was now . . . well . . . fat . . . and unkempt . . . she has, over the long years of marriage, let herself go . . . far) suddenly had an odd thought during a commercial ("One hundred doctors said if marooned on a desert island they would rather have Mother Henderson's Little Liver Pills than any other little liver pills"—"I'll have to git Perce to buy me some'a them," thought Olive, who now owned bushels of pills of all kinds). Her thought, which came next after the one about having Perce get her some of Mother Henderson's Little Liver Pills was:

"You know . . . somethin's goin' on. Ever since we moved here, Perce's been actin' jest like a . . . a school kid what's been told no school 'cause the schoolhouse burnt down. And Dixie . . . she's prancing and sniffin' and . . . and both a them can hardly wait to take their walk . . . and, hey, hadn't they gone when it rained? . . . Hey, it hain't another woman, huh? Ho, ho, ho, another woman, for God's sake, old Perce makin' eyes at another female . . . hell, that's like sayin' it's gonna snow on the Fourth of July. 'Sides what kinda nutty old woman'd pay any 'tention to spineless old sourpuss Perce, huh? Ho, ho, ho. And as for Perce, hell, she'd havta be cleaner'n neater'n an angel straight outta heaven fer old persnickety. 'Olive, can't you just try not to spill snacks under the couch? Hell, I'm imagining things. . . . I better take a couple more them stress vitamin pills."

But that night, in her room, she slyly broached the subject to Dixie. She got nowhere, absolutely nowhere, Dixie's loyalty having shifted totally to Percy, he who was solely responsible for the heavenly nightly trysts (Dixie and Henry had not gotten beyond sniffing and slobbering and goo-gooing at one another, but both were confident that the future held deeper bliss).

"Okay, you ungrateful thing, don't talk," snapped Olive when dear brave Dixie kept shaking her head, pretending she hadn't the slightest idea what Olive was talking about. "Think you're smart, don't ya? Well, let me tell you if you two smarty pants is up to somethin', God help you, that's all I got to say . . . God help you."

At which poor Dixie shivered noticeably and burrowed deeper into her smelly old blanket on her smelly old chair.

All the while *meantime*, a vital ingredient in all drama, had been busy. Sammy had wandered off one afternoon when Joey, a six-pack of beer down the drain, fell asleep on the front room couch, having neglected to latch the screen door in the kitchen. Awakening just before twilight and finding Sammy gone, Joey was frantic. He rushed out back, yelling for Sammy. No Sammy. He raced around front, screaming for Sammy. No Sammy. He walked rapidly up and down the street, making a desperate effort not to be conspicuous, calling out between cupped hands, "Sammy . . . come, old boy . . . Sammy . . . come on, old boy . . . Sammy . . . where are you?"

It was in vain. Finally, the gloaming looming, he hastened to a next door neighbor, one, like all of them, that he had barely spoken to. Had they seen his dog?

Yes, they had, the dogcatcher had made her regular Tuesday afternoon sweep of the area and had picked up his dog. No doubt it had been taken to the pound.

"The city is very strict about animals, Mr. Smith, very strict. There is an ordinance about them running loose. You'll find that Madisonville is proud of its reputation for, well, for law and order, as you might say."

"Yeah," Joey managed, "yeah . . . and . . . thanks . . . thanks."

He rushed back to his house. He grabbed the phone book. He had a hell of a time locating the dog pound. Finally he found it under Humane Services. He dialed the number. He got a recording, a sweet voice informing him that "You have reached the Madisonville Humane Society facilities. We are closed for the day. We shall reopen promptly at eight tomorrow. We have many dogs and cats and other animals that would make lovely pets. Many of them, to our intense sorrow, will have to be put away unless people will take these dear creatures into their houses. Have a good day."

Joey spent a terrible night. He walked the floor all night long. Time after time he crossed his heart and hoped to die if he ever again took another drink of beer.

"If anything happens to poor old Sammy," he moaned and moaned and moaned, "I ain't never gonna forgive myself. I'm nothin' but a drunken bum . . . don't deserve no one like Sammy . . . poor old Sammy . . . him out there among all them strangers . . . wonderin' what . . . what the hell time is it . . . Je-

sus, only three o'clock. What the hell's wrong with the time . . . what's . . . ah . . . hell . . . hell . . . hell . . ."

He was at the dog pound at seven o'clock. The place had a chain link fence around the runs and the buildings. There were dogs in the runs, some of them asleep, some awake and barking. He couldn't see Sammy. The hour crept by. Finally, at five minutes to eight, a small van pulled up. A stout woman in her late fifties, dressed in jeans and a heavy blouse, got out of the van.

"You the dogcatcher?" Joey demanded of her.

The woman smiled.

"Well, my proper title is Animal Control Officer, but I'll accept dogcatcher. Are you here to adopt a pet . . . Mr. . . ."

"O'Malley," said Joey quickly, not thinking, then, "I mean Smith, yeah, Smith. No, I ain't here to adopt no pet. Didn't you pick up a poor old black and white dog off Dogwood Lane late yesterday, huh, huh, huh?"

"Really, Mr. . . . Smith?, there's no reason to get so excited. Yes, I did bring in the dog you mention. It was running loose and Madisonville doesn't allow . . ."

"I know all about how tough all'a ya are on poor little animals . . . the hell with that . . . I want my dog . . . how much?"

Mrs. Collins put a stout hand on a stout hip and gazed at Joey with steady blue eyes.

"Now . . . Mr. whatever your name is" (this made Joey suddenly flinch inwardly; damnit I done somethin' conspicuous), "you'll act like a gentleman or I'll phone the police. Now I can understand your being upset over your dog but we have rules and they are enforced. For one thing, we require all animals to have tags on them indicating the creature's name, the owner, phone number, and address. Your dog does not have a tag, but I'll waive that requirement if you can produce a certificate showing me that the dog . . . what is its name . . ."

"Sammy," wailed Joey. "Sammy. He's sixteen years old . . . ma'am."

"I would have guessed about that," Mrs. Collins said. "But I must have the certificate showing that Sammy's had all the required shots—rabies, distemper, leptospirosis, infectious hepatitis—within the past three years. Otherwise, our vet will have to administer the shots. Now, please, I'm busy . . . I must go . . . you bring the certificate or a copy of it out here today, and Sammy will be released to you."

Back on Dogwood Lane, terribly agitated, Joey devoured a liquid

breakfast of orange juice, beer, beer, and beer. He was in trouble. Deep trouble. He had no certificate of vaccination. It had, along with all other evidence of Joey O'Malley, been burned by the F.B.I. before they sold Joey's old house.

Mrs. Collins, beginning to get suspicious—or so Joey thought—had promised not to have the vet inoculate Sammy for at least three days, giving Joey time to locate the certificate, misplaced since . . . “ah . . . we moved from . . . up east.”

“Well, Mr. Smith, I have to go . . . listen to those dogs barking . . . and as usual my helper is late. Bring the certificate or a copy, pay the twenty-five dollar fine, and I'll be happy to turn Sammy over to you.”

“But . . . like I said . . . ma'am,” whined Joey before leaving, “please don't let no vet give Sammy no shots. Last time . . . and honest to God, ma'am, like I said it was only two years ago . . . yeah . . . I'm goin' . . . but last time he almost kicked the bucket . . . guess being old an' . . . 'lergic to shots . . . please, ma'am, don't let the vet touch him till I git back.”

“I promise,” promised Mrs. Collins. “Now I must go. I have a very busy day ahead of me.”

Breakfast done, his whole insides in one sloshing turmoil, Joey told himself, Now sit down . . . take it easy . . . you gotta think this out . . . can't have Sammy gettin' no more shots . . . they'd finish him . . . the poor old boy . . . gotta git a copy from the animal hospital back east. How the hell am I gonna do that without . . . can't tell me The Boss ain't got the whole rotten Organization out lookin' fer me . . . they musta talked to the old neighbors . . . they'd find out about me havin' Sammy—an' they'd check on all the animal hospitals to see if I left a forwarding address . . . the hell they would . . . why would they check . . . they ain't that smart . . . why would the hospital know where I was. Hell, I'm gettin' all worked up over nothin' . . . anyways I gotta git on the ball . . . poor old Sam . . . he must be goin' crazy wonderin' what . . . sniff . . . sniff . . .

Money talks, said Anonymous long ago. All men have their price, wrote Sir Robert Walpole later on. Sad but true. One thousand dollars was Helen's price. Helen was the bookkeeper at the very busy, very profitable Elm Grove Animal Hospital.

Per arrangement she met Pete, a disreputable P.I., at the Blue Angel at eight that night.

“You brought the money, the thousand dollars?” she asked.

“Yeah, I got it. It's yours soon as you give me O'Malley's address.”

"It's not exactly his address," explained Helen. "He phoned today, all upset, needs a copy of his dog's certificate of vaccination for some reason. I'm to send it by way of Express Mail tomorrow morning. I told him I couldn't possibly mail it today."

Pete's price was ten thousand dollars. Hell, he told himself, this is the first chance I got in all the years in this rotten business to make a killing. Damn it, I oughtta go for double that. Naw, that's gettin' too greedy . . . they might not like it.

Nickie couldn't come to the phone right away, his wife said . . . was it important? Yes, yes, very important . . . real important. Okay, she'd get Nickie . . .

"Damn you," snarled Nickie, torn away from a Mike Hammer rerun, "didn't I tell ya I wanted to see this show. Didn't I?"

"Sure, sure, you did, Nickie, but the man says it's important . . . very important . . . don't get mad, Nickie, please."

It was important. Nickie phoned The Boss. By then it was nine thirty, past The Boss's bedtime. But Nickie finally convinced The Boss's nurse (the nurse was going to testify at the trial that her patient was in bad shape, awful shape) that she was in for a rough time from The Boss if she didn't get him to the phone, right away.

"Well, Nickie," said The Boss when Nickie had hastily explained everything, "you done good . . . real good . . . yeah . . . get over here . . . hell, I got ten thousand . . . you take it to that P. I. but, Nickie, make him give you Joey's address . . . yeah, yeah I know . . . it's a post office box number . . . and, Nickie, make sure that blood-suckin' P. I.—we'll take care of him later—don't mail that letter till day after tomorrow. That way you can fly down there, rent a car, watch when Joey shows up . . . mind, Nickie, take real good care Joey don't see ya . . . and, Nickie, everything goes okay, you got a bonus comin' . . . a big bonus, Nickie."

"Oh . . . boss . . . oh . . . boss . . ." was all Nickie, overwhelmed, could manage.

It was still May, lovely, wonderful, springladen May. Percy, hurrying through the dishes, kept warning Dixie, whimpering at his feet in the kitchen, to "ssssshhhhhhhh, Dixie, ssssshhhhhhh . . . it's not dark yet. Be still. Do you want you-know-who to find out, do you?"

Oh no, no, Dixie didn't want that. Then be quiet . . . take it easy . . . we only have about ten more minutes.

Alas . . . ten minutes later.

"Well, we're on our way," said Percy, deliberately—with enormous effort—keeping his voice gloomy. "Come on, Dixie. . . ." Come

on, Dixie: that was totally unnecessary. She was straining at the leash.

"Just a minute, Perce," said Olive, pushing her amplitudinous self off the couch, first switching off the TV via the remote control. "'Bout time I got some exercise. Yeah, I'm gettin' stale, I'll take Dixie tonight."

Poor Percy. He nearly fainted. He had feared something like this.

He had, each night, tried to get up enough courage to tell dear, sweet, wonderful Martha that there might be some nights when his wife would walk Dixie and that she, Martha, might find Olive . . . ah . . . well . . . not too sociable.

"Somethin' wrong, Perce?" inquired Olive. "You look like you're 'bout to pass out. Something you ate? Hell, you cooked the supper. Ho . . . ho . . . ho . . . come on, Dixie . . . come on, damnit, he ain't takin' ya, I am."

Poor Dixie.

Olive was no more than ten feet out of the door when Percy rushed to the phone.

It was in vain. She didn't answer. She and Henry were already on their way to the cul-de-sac.

Percy died four times, waiting for Olive and Dixie to return. He was slumped in a chair when he heard them on the porch. He straightened up. He begged his racing heart to calm down, calm down, please calm down.

Olive, spitting fire, wasted no time. She let go of Dixie, who was still leashed. Poor Dixie raced over to Percy. Percy, his hands trembling violently, managed to take off the leash. Dixie licked Percy's hands.

"Guess who I seen, Perce," said Olive, standing just inside the door, and breathing heavily. "Yeah . . . guess . . . like to know, huh?"

No, no, he wouldn't. His head shook involuntarily.

"Ya wouldn't, huh?" went on Olive, her fat face mean, ugly, nasty. "Well, I'm gonna' tell ya anyhow . . . I seen your little Miss Goody Twoshoes floozie. What's the matter, Perce . . . still feelin' the supper? . . . ho . . . ho . . . ho . . . Ya shoulda been there, Perce . . . it was . . . ah . . . like a . . . well, first thing I hear down the end of the street is this here little wee cutiepie baby voice a'sayin', 'Oh, Percy, I thought you weren't comin', but you're here . . . that's all that matters. . . . Well, when me and Dixie . . . that damn dog, after all I done fer her . . . when your

little sneakin' whore seen who it was . . . well . . . Perce . . . after I got done wid her, telling her what a dirty little husband-stealin' slut she was, she started bawling jest like . . ."

"Stop it, stop it, stop it," yelled Percy, jumping from his chair and racing toward the stairs. "For shame, for shame, you awful, horrid creature to . . . to . . . I'll never forgive you for . . ." He couldn't continue. Sobbing, he raced up the stairs to his room. Dixie wasted no time in following.

Olive, heaving and wheezing, cursing also, lumbered upstairs after the two. Percy's door was locked. Olive pounded, shouting vituperation. But, unused to such strenuous activity, she gave up quickly, and tottering and swaying, she made it to her room where she fell into bed, the resultant crash reverberating through the house like a small earthquake.

It was around four in the morning when Percy, who had grown amazingly calm and tranquil during the long night, finally came up with the best way to kill Olive. He, a great mystery reader, had thought of all the ways to make it appear to be an accident. A thin wire tied across the top of the stairs. It would trip her, she would come tumbling down. Still, maybe she would only be injured. Drowning in the bathtub. A good idea. Or throwing the hair dryer or some other small appliance which was electrified . . . that would do it. But Olive only bathed on Saturday night and this was Tuesday. Poison, that was the answer. But he had no poison. Finally he had the perfect solution.

"Sleeping pills in her chocolate cake, that's it," he whispered aloud. Poor Dixie, she also hadn't slept a wink, nodded her head as if to say that's agreeable with me, now can't we go to sleep, please?

Tension was high next morning. Everyone was late for breakfast, cooked as usual by Percy (he had taken over the cooking years before). Olive was so mad that she was able to consume only six pancakes, seven sausages, four poached eggs, and a quart of black coffee.

"Think you're gettin' away with it, don't ya, Perce," she hissed once her unusually weak appetite had been temporarily satisfied. "Well, I got news fer you. We're movin'. I'm gonna put the house up fer sale. Whatta ya think of that."

"Do whatever you wish, Olive," replied Percy, calmly. "Whatever you wish."

That upset Olive. She launched into a screaming tirade that abruptly ended in midstream when Percy carefully picked up a

butcher knife and said, "One more word, Olive, and I'll kill you. One more word."

"Oh my God," wailed Olive, "wife abuse, wife abuse."

"Shut up," ordered Percy, his fist clutching the raised knife.

"All right, Perce, all right, all right . . . I won't say nothin' more . . . please don't hurt me . . . please . . . I don't feel so good . . . kin I go upstairs . . . to bed?"

With Olive in bed, Percy cleaned up the kitchen, calmly planning the evening menu—roast beef, mashed potatoes, applesauce, peas and a salad for him (high fibre), and a huge chocolate cake with twice as much chocolate as usual plus twenty crushed sleeping pills. Nickie was on the phone from his hotel room.

"Yeah, boss, I got him nailed down. Yeah, like the P. I. said, Joey had the thing sent to him General Delivery to a post office fifteen miles down the road from where he's living here in this one horse town. Yeah . . . I musta waited fer two hours, hidin' in the car. Then I had a hell of a time following him here. Couple of times I thought he seen me but I don't think so. He went straight to the town dog pound . . . I had to stay back on a side street . . . him and the dog passed me later, and boss, that dog was slobbering all over Joey. Crazy, eh? Yeah, boss . . . tonight . . . yeah . . . yeah, sure. I'll wait till jest after dark . . . I kin git into the house . . . you ain't forgettin' I usta be the best. Okay, okay . . . I'll hang up . . . yeah, okay."

Upstairs Olive raged, swore, cursed, threw things all over the room. How dare that gutless skin and bones beanpole bastard treat me like this . . . after all I put up wid him, him and his sissy ways. I coulda married a real man, not a . . . a mealy-mouthed . . . mealy-mouthed . . . damn . . . damn . . . to think now that . . . that time's kinda ketchin' up wid me, an' I maybe ain't as . . . as . . . well . . . attractive as . . . well, everybody gits old, don't they . . . to think he's tryin' to throw me over fer some sneaky little painted hussy—that little girl stuff don't fool old Olive, not fer a minute . . . etc. . . . etc. . . . etc. . . .

Olive refused to come down for lunch. Bring it up, she screamed at Percy. No, he wouldn't. By dinner (she insisted on calling it supper) she was famished. And the delicious waftings of roast beef and other mouth-watering aromas was irresistible. She came down. She gobbled things as Percy, nibbling at his high fibre, watched in amazing tranquility. Oh, there were little horripilating ripples tingling his once spineless spine, but they were the kind of tingles a knight errant feels before slaying the dragon. He waited until

Olive had devoured half the cake and was starting on the rest. Then he got up from the table.

Olive, her mouth full, overflowing, said nothing. She had been waiting for this.

"Come on, Dixie, it's dark enough now. Let's you and I go for our walk," said Percy. Dixie yelped happily.

"I'm afraid this is our last walk, Dixie old girl," said Percy as he and Dixie started up the street. "The police will arrest me for murder . . . and I hope you'll be happy with Martha and Henry." Would Dixie be happy? She did a quick little doggy jig as she bounced along beside Percy.

Olive waited five minutes, just to be sure. She didn't want Percy coming back while she was on the phone to the police. She had it all worked out. She would phone the police, put on a big act. And after hanging up, she would make a fist and pummel herself on her face, her neck, her other arm. She bruised easily. She would show that sneaky rat of a husband—imagine him, after all these years, playing around behind her back, she would show him . . . Daddy was right . . . they're all rotten, every damn one of them. . . .

She picked up the phone, put it right back down. Gotta be sure, she told herself. Better go outside and see if . . . well, he might jest be foolin', jest waitin' to see what I was gonna do and then come bustin' in. . . .

She opened the door. Went out on the porch. The night was cool, moonless, and misty. She walked down to the gate. She opened the gate. Suddenly she felt dizzy. She wobbled out into the street. Wobbled toward the street light on the corner.

What the hell, she thought, what's goin' on . . . musta . . . et . . . too . . . much . . . gotta git back . . . take . . . my . . . stomach pills . . . gotta . . .

That was it for Olive Tubbs Walmsley, age sixty-five, terrible person, the poor creature.

Up the street, on Martha's porch, Percy and Martha heard the shots. Percy had been apologizing for Olive's hideous behavior. But Martha kept insisting it was all her fault.

"I never should have allowed myself to . . . look forward to . . . our . . . harmless little walks, Percy . . . at least they were harmless at the beginning. I began to . . . to . . . oh, Percy, your wife was right . . . I am a bad woman . . . a . . ." She began to sob. Percy hugged her, which allowed Dixie to rub up against a cooperative Henry.

"No . . . no . . . no, Martha, don't talk like that, you're too fine . . ."

That was when the shots rang out.

The chief of police was interviewed by the local TV station. It was big news, incredible news, three murders in one night in Madisonville.

"Why, the . . . the last time that . . . that happened . . . ah . . . you know . . . three people killed at the same time in Madisonville . . . must have been during the Civil War when the Yankees attacked the Home Guard," babbled the excited anchorperson, Judy Carson. "It's just . . . just . . . well . . . unbelievable."

Calming down under the director's frantic signaling, Judy then asked the chief if he could shed any light on the "the . . . unfortunate situation."

The chief could shed very little light. The way he and the boys figured it, it was a dope thing.

"Dope? In Madisonville?" The anchor person was incredulous. "Here. . . ?"

Yep, here. The chief, steely-eyed, firm-jawed, laconic, said that no place was safe from "the terrible scourge." Had the identities of the two men been established? No, but the fingerprints were even then being flown to F.B.I. headquarters in Washington and the chief fully expected that the dead men would prove to have been members of "one of them big crime syndicates, up north, 'er back east."

"Both of them had .32 caliber revolvers," the chief said.

"Oh . . . my . . . my . . . ah . . . how many shots were fired, chief?"
At least twelve.

"Oh . . . my . . . ah . . . chief . . . the third victim, the woman, I understand the poor creature was the victim of that old cliché . . . you know."

"Ah don't understand, ma'am?"

"Being in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Oh . . . guess so . . . we figure, me an' the boys, she was out for her evening constitutional."

"Oh . . . how awful . . . is it true that on being informed of his wife's death her husband fainted and had to be taken to the hospital?"

"Yep."

"Well, no wonder. It must have been a terrible shock, terrible. Now, the . . . poor woman . . . Mrs. Walmsley. Is it true that the bullet that killed her had ricocheted off that metal neighborhood

crime watch sign on the corner? Is that correct, chief?"

"Yep."

"My goodness . . . pretty ironic, chief, don't you think?"

"What, ma'am?"

"Ah, well . . . the purpose of the sign is to warn . . . ah . . . to, ah, protect the residents on the street and . . . well . . . I see that our time is up, chief. Thank you for a very enlightening interview. And I, and all residents of Madisonville, wish to thank you and the brave men on the force for the good work all of you have been doing in keeping Madisonville one of the safest places in the whole country."

"Thank you, ma'am."

Percy recovered quickly, although he was in a daze for a week or so. He and Martha waited a decent interval—exactly six months—before marrying. Madisonville having bad memories, they sold both houses and moved fifty miles north to the lovely little city with the pretty little park beside the murmuring stream which Olive had summarily rejected because of the long-haired hippie (he was still there; he proved to be poet-in-residence at the local college).

Thus, while the two dear young oldsters are barely back from their honeymoon—they had a divine ten days in Hawaii—it is absolutely not premature nor is it flaunting fate for us to say, with complete confidence: "And They Lived Happily Ever After."

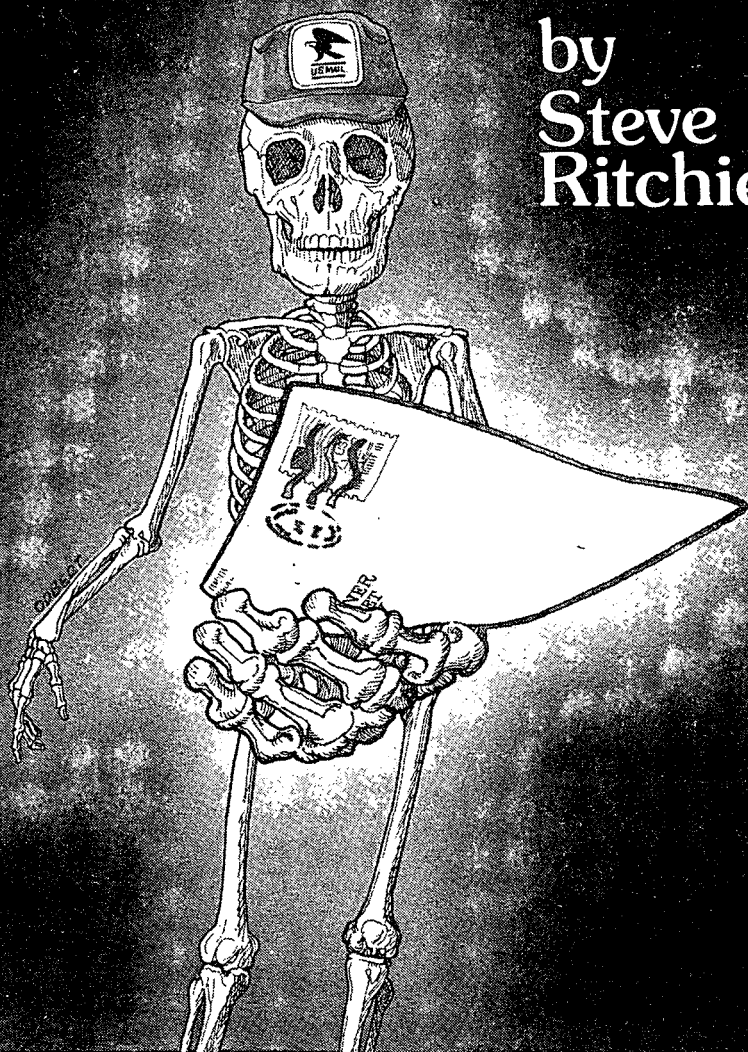
Dixie and Henry? They lived happily also. Sammy? He escaped the wild fusillade that misty night and kind, decent Percy took him in and administered fond care to him. But poor Sammy died of a broken heart in less than a month, grief-stricken at having been abandoned by his once kind, wonderful, soft-hearted, loving master.

That's life. For every "And They Lived Happily Ever After" there are a thousand . . . well . . . it's . . . you know . . . it's . . . well . . . a sad old world.

FICTION

Post Mortem

by
Steve
Ritchie



September 19, 1985

Dear Mr. Jack Turner,

Several years ago, we met at a party held for a mutual friend, Jayne O'Neal. At the time, I'm afraid, I had a little too much to drink. I took a taxi home.

The reason I am writing you now is that I recently remembered I had to borrow ten dollars from you for the fare. Enclosed is a ten dollar bill to repay you. Thank you for the "temporary" loan.

Sincerely,
Bill Harrison
1235 W. 34th St.
Scranton, PA

October 1, 1985

Dear Mr. Harrison,

I was pleasantly surprised by your letter of September 19th. I now recall Jayne's party and the ten dollars. Thank you for returning it after such a long time. It's nice to know there are people who are conscientious about such things.

Yours Truly,
Jack Turner
167 N. Park St.
Scranton, PA

October 12, 1985

Dear Mr. Turner,

Your letter arrived in yesterday's mail. Thank you for the compliment. I believe it is up to the individual to take responsibility for his actions. Even though a number of years have passed, I felt it my duty to return the ten dollars you had lent me.

Sincerely,
Bill Harrison

October 20, 1985

Dear Bill,

You really did not have to send me another letter thanking me for thanking you. This is a minor affair, one that until recently was forgotten by both of us. I believe we don't have to keep thanking

each other through the mail. So with that, I say one last thank you, and goodbye.

Jack Turner

October 27, 1985

Dear Jack,

I agree this correspondence has gone on long enough. As you pointed out, until very recently neither of us remembered the incident. It seems a bit ridiculous for us to continue to send these letters back and forth. I hope you have a pleasant life, and farewell.

Bill

November 5, 1985

Dear Bill,

When I wrote that we should stop writing letters to each other, I meant that you should not write again. Trying not to be rude, I say I would rather not receive any more correspondence from you. It is a futile exercise. This one-up-manship of yours must stop now. I don't want to have to waste any more of my time reading letters from you.

Jack

November 12, 1985

Dear Jack,

I heartily agree with you. We are both wasting time answering each other's letters. But it is you, not I, who are practicing one-up-manship. Why do you continue to answer my letters? Any reasonable person would have stopped by now.

Bill

November 17, 1985

Dear Bill,

Today I opened my mailbox expecting nothing but bills, and there was your letter. The fact that you answered my letter was nice, but frankly, I had no intention of gaining a pen pal. My only

purpose was to reply to your first letter. So once and for all, thank you and GOODBYE.

Jack

November 23, 1985

Dear Jack,

Why must you keep writing? I myself had hoped to see the end of this incessant postal dialogue, since it is of no use. Let us stop with this letter.

Bill

December 1, 1985

Dear Bill,

Enough is enough. I must simply insist we stop this endless correspondence. Your letters, long past annoying, are now becoming maddening. I demand you stop sending them to me.

Jack

December 9, 1985

To Mr. Jack Turner:

In reaction to your letter of the first, I say you are a nut. Do not send me any more of your blasted letters.

Bill Harrison

December 13, 1985

Mr. Harrison:

Stop it. I can't stand reading your letters. My wife thinks I'm a compulsive letter writer, but next to you I'm Sigmund Freud. You are a crazy person. If you continue to write, I may have to resort to other means. DON'T WRITE BACK.

Jack Turner

December 19, 1985

To Mr. Jack Turner:

I'm not the one who is crazy, you are. But let's keep personalities out of this. Your wife evidently does not know proper etiquette. Civilized people reply to each and every letter they receive. Over

the last fifteen years of marriage, my wife and I have never failed to answer a letter. Since you are certifiable, you should not concern yourself with this. You do not have to answer this letter. In fact, I insist you don't.

Bill Harrison

December 26, 1985

Mr. Harrison:

YOU WROTE BACK. You have completely destroyed the holidays. Here is your damn ten dollars back. I swear, if I see one more letter from you, I'll make sure you'll regret ever setting pen to paper. If we ever meet on the street, you'd better run, and run fast.

Jack Turner

P.S. Very clever of you to change your mailing address to a post office box without leaving a forwarding notice. However, I have a friend in the post office who was able to give me your new address.

January 15, 1986

Dear Mr. Turner:

Enclosed is the ten dollars you sent me. I don't want any of your filthy money. Why don't you put it to good use and get some head X-rays? I think you will be surprised. Many insane people like you have brain tumors.

Your empty threats do not intimidate me.

Bill Harrison

January 22, 1986

Harrison:

That's it. You have gone too far. I gave you every chance to stop writing, but you continued. I'm coming for you.

Turner

From the Scranton *Advisor*, January 25, 1986:

SCOUTS FIND BODY OF MUGGING VICTIM

Early this morning the body of William Harrison of 1235 W. 34th St., was found on the outskirts of the city by members of Boy Scout Troop 42. The scouts, who were on their annual

winter camping trip, found the body at approximately 6:30 A.M. They notified the police at 6:45 A.M.

The police are working on the theory that Mr. Harrison resisted an attempted mugging when he was fatally stabbed. A single ten dollar bill was pinned to the victim's chest by the murder weapon. The police have no leads on the killing.

Mr. Harrison, 43, is survived by his wife of fifteen years, Susan.

February 20, 1986

Dear Mr. Turner,

I write to give you some bad news of my husband. He was stabbed to death a little less than a month ago by a mugger. I know he thought highly of you because every time a letter from you arrived, he would immediately lock himself in his study to read it. He never showed me any of your letters, but I believe you two must have been close. Since you wrote each other so often, I'm sorry I haven't contacted you sooner, but there were a great many details I had to attend to.

Sincerely,
Susan Harrison

February 25, 1986

Dear Susan,

I regret to say that my husband was overtaken by grief when he received your letter. He collapsed in the middle of reading it. I rushed him to the hospital. The doctors say he has suffered a nervous breakdown with no hope of recovery. He is now under sedation twenty-four hours a day.

I, too, did not read any of the letters our husbands wrote. Over the last few months Jack was quite agitated and couldn't sleep. I believe the letters from your husband were one of the things that kept him sane. We both have suffered a loss, and I think any more correspondence between us will only increase the grief.

In sadness,
Ellen Turner

March 3, 1986

Dear Ellen,

I would like to thank you for your kind letter . . .

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Arthur Tress.

The angel for crabs? We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less—and be sure to include a crime, please), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

The winning entry for the Mid-December Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 154.

Dogs



by
**Loren D.
Estleman**

Elda Chase lived in an efficiency flat in Iroquois Heights with no rugs on the hardwood floor and the handsome furniture arranged in geometric patterns like a manor house maze. That day

she had the curtains open on the window overlooking the municipal park and the statue of LaSalle with his foot up on a rock scratching his head over a map he had unrolled on his knee. The view was strictly for

my benefit; Elda Chase had been blind since birth.

Not that you'd have known it from the way she got around that apartment, discreetly touching this chair and brushing that lamp as she bustled to catch the whistling teapot and find the cups and place the works on a platter and bring it over and set it down on the coffee table. When I leaned forward from the sofa to pour, I was just in time to accept the full cup she extended to me. She filled the other one then and took a seat in the chair opposite. She was a tall woman in her middle fifties who wore her graying hair pinned up and lightly tinted glasses with clear plastic rims. Her ruby blouse and long matching skirt went well with her high coloring and she had on pearl earrings and white low-heeled shoes. I wondered who picked it all out.

"The Braille edition of the Yellow Pages comes so late," she said, balancing her cup and saucer on one crossed knee. "I was half afraid your number had changed."

"Not in a dozen years. Or anything else about the office, except the wallpaper."

"Anyway, thank you for coming. You were the fourth investigator I tried. The first number was disconnected and the other two men referred me to the Humane Society. I'd called them

right after it happened, of course. They wanted me to put up posters around the neighborhood. As if I could go out at all without my Max."

"Max is the dog?"

"A shepherd. I've had him three years. When Lucy died I was sure I'd never have another one as good, but Max is special. He's taken me places I'd never have dared go with Lucy."

I sipped some tea and was relieved to find out it was bitter. Watching her operate I'd begun to feel inadequate. "You're sure he didn't run away?"

"Trained seeing-eye dogs don't run away, Mr. Walker. But to lay your cynicism to rest, the padlock on the kennel door had been cut. You saw it in the yard?"

"A six-foot chain link fence to keep in a dog that wouldn't run away," I confirmed.

"The fence was to protect him. It didn't do a very good job. I knew dog-stealing was a possibility, but I hate to keep a big animal cooped up indoors. The police were not encouraging."

"I'm not surprised, in this town."

"I like Iroquois Heights," she said.

"The park is nice."

She raised her face. With her sightless eyes downcast behind the colored lenses she looked like a lioness taking in the sun. "Can you find him?"

"There are markets for pure-breds. I can ask some questions. I can't promise anything. My specialty's tracing two-legged mammals."

"I could have gone to someone who traces pets for a living. I don't like professional dog people. They're strident. They'd make me out the villain for not hiring a governess to look after the dog."

"Is there a picture?"

She groped for and opened a drawer in the end table next to her chair and handed me a color snapshot of herself in a wrap and gloves hanging on to a harness attached to a black and tan German shepherd.

"Marks?" I put it in my breast pocket.

"Now, how would I know that?"

"Sorry. I forgot."

"I'll take that as a compliment. He answers to his name with a sharp bark." She took a checkbook off the end table and started writing. "Seven-fifty is your retainer, I believe."

I took the check and put it in my wallet. I drank some more tea, peeled my upper lip back down, and stood, setting aside the cup and saucer. "I'll call you tomorrow. Earlier if I find out anything."

"Thank you." She hesitated. "It isn't just that I need him. If it were just that—"

"I had a dog once," I said. "I

still think about him sometimes."

"You sound like someone who would."

Mrs. Chase's landlady, a thin blonde named Silcox, lived on the ground floor. Mrs. Chase was her oldest tenant and Mrs. Silcox's son, a sophomore at the University of Michigan, had built the kennel at his mother's request. Neither was home when it was broken into.

From there I went to the office of the *Iroquois Heights Spectator*. The newspaper was the flagship of a fleet owned by a local politician, but the classified section was reliable. I asked for that editor and was directed to a paunchy grayhead standing at the water cooler.

"Rube Zendt," he said when I introduced myself, and shook my hand. "Born Reuben, but trust newspaper folk to latch on to the obvious."

His hair was thin and black on top with gray sidewalls and he had a chipmunk grin that was too small for his full cheeks. He wore black-rimmed glasses and a blue tie at half-mast on a white shirt. I apologized for interrupting his break.

"This distilled stuff rusts my pipes. I only come here to watch the bubbles. Got something to sell or buy, or did you lose something or find it?"

"Close. A local woman hired me to find her dog. I thought that holding down lost and found you'd be the one to talk to about the local market."

"Dog-napping, you mean. I just take the ads. Man you want to see is Stillwell on cophouse."

"He around?"

"This time of day you can catch him at the police station."

"What time of day can I catch him anywhere else?"

The chipmunk grin widened a hundredth of an inch. "I see you know our town. But things aren't so bad down there since Mark Proust made acting chief."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning he spends all his time in his office. Tell Stillwell Rube sent you."

The first three floors of a corner building on the main stem belonged to the city police. It was a hot day in August and the air conditioning was operating on the ground floor, but that had nothing to do with the drop in my temperature when I came in from the street. At the peak of the busing controversy in the early seventies a group of local citizens had protested the measure by overturning a bus full of schoolchildren; some of that group were in office now and they had built the city law-enforcement structure from the prosecutor right down to the last meter maid.

A steely-haired desk sergeant with an exotropic eye turned the good one on me from behind his high bench when I said I was looking for Stillwell of the *Spectator* and held it on me for another minute before saying, "Over there."

The wandering eye was pointing north and I went that way. He'd never have made the Detroit department with that eye, but with his temperament he was right at home.

Two big patrolmen in light summer uniforms were fondling their saps in the corner by the men's room, leering at and listening to a man with no hair above the spread collar of his shirt and a wrinkled cotton sport coat over it.

"... and the other guy says 'Help me find my keys and we'll drive out of here!'"

The cops opened a pair of mouths like buckets and roared. I approached the bald man. "Mr. Stillwell?"

The laughter stopped like a bell grabbed in mid-clang. Two pairs of cop eyes measured me and the bald man's face went guarded with the jokester's leer still in place. "Who's asking?"

"Amos Walker. Rube Zendt said to talk to you."

"Step into my office." He pushed open the men's room door and held it. The cops moved off.

The place had two urinals, a

stall, and a sink. He leaned his shoulders against the stall, waiting. He was younger than the clean head indicated, around thirty. He had no eyebrows and clear blue eyes in a lineless face whose innocence could turn the oldest filthy joke into a laugh marathon. I gave him my spiel.

"Shepherd," he said. "There's not a lot of call for them without papers. No gold rushes going on in Alaska to goose the sled-dog trade."

"It's a seeing eye. That's an expensive market."

"They're handled by big organizations that train their own. They don't need to deal in stolen animals and you'd need papers and a good story to sell them one that's already schooled. Tell your client to place an ad with Rube offering a reward and stay home and wait to hear from whoever took the dog."

"Staying home is no problem."

"I guess not. Sorry I can't help."

"What about the fight game?"

"There's no fight game in this town."

"What town we talking about?"

"Yeah." He crossed his ankles then and I knew my leg had been pulled. "That racket's all pit bulls now. I can think of only one guy would even look at a shepherd."

I gave him twenty dollars.

"Henry Revere." He crumpled the bill into the side pocket of his sport coat. "Caretaker over at the old high school. He's there days."

"School board know what he does nights?"

"Everyone knows everything that goes on in this town, except the people who pay taxes to live in it."

"Thanks." I gave him a card, which he crumpled into the same pocket without looking at it. Coming out of the men's room I had the desk sergeant's errant eye. The other was on a woman in a yellow pants suit who had come in to complain about a delivery van that was blocking her Coup de Ville in her driveway.

It was a three story brick box with big mullioned windows and a steel tube that slanted down from the roof for a fire escape. When the new school was built down the road, this one had been converted into administrative offices and a place to vote in district elections. I found its only inhabitant on that summer vacation day, an old black man wearing a green worksuit and tennis shoes, waxing the gym floor. He saw me coming in from the hall and turned off the machine. "Street shoes!"

I stopped. He left the ma-

chine and limped my way. I saw that the sole of one of his sneakers was built up twice as thick as its mate.

"Mister, you know how hard it is to get black heel marks off of hardwood?"

"Sorry." I showed him my I.D. "I'm looking for a German shepherd, answers to Max. If you're Henry Revere, someone told me you deal in them."

"Someone lied. What use I got for dogs? I got a job."

"Also a lot of girlfriends. Unless those are dog hairs on your pants."

He caught himself looking, too late. His cracked face bunched like a fist. "You're trespassing."

I held up two ten-dollar bills. He didn't look at them.

"This here's a good job, mister. I got a wife with a bad cough and a boy at Wayne State. I ain't trading them for no twenty bucks. You better get out before I call the po-lice."

I put away the bills. "What are you afraid of?"

"Unemployment and welfare," he said. "Maybe you never been there."

Back in my office in downtown Detroit I made some calls. First I rang Elda Chase, who said that no one had called her yet offering to return Max for a reward. I tried the Humane Society in three counties and

got a female shepherd, a mix, and a lecture about the importance of spaying and neutering one's pets at sixty bucks a crack. After that it was time for dinner. When I got back from the place down the street the telephone was ringing. I said hello twice.

"Walker?"

"This is Walker."

Another long pause. "Ed Stillwell. The *Spectator*?"

I said I remembered him. He sounded drunk.

"Yeah. Listen, what I told you 'bout Henry Revere? Forget it. Bum steer."

"I don't think so. He denied too much when I spoke to him."

There was a muffled silence on his end, as of a hand clamped over the mouthpiece. Then: "Listen. Forget it, okay? I only gave you his name 'cause I needed the twenty. I got to make a monthly spousal support payment you wouldn't believe. What I know about dogfighting you could stick in a whistle."

"Okay."

"'Kay."

A receiver was fumbled into a cradle. I hung up and sat there smoking a couple of cigarettes before I went home.

"... believe the motive was robbery. Once again, Iroquois Heights journalist Edward Stillwell, in critical condition

this morning at Detroit General Hospital after police found him beaten unconscious in an empty lot next to the *Spectator* building."

I had turned on the radio while fixing breakfast and got the end of the story. I tried all the other stations. Nothing. I turned off the stove and called the *Spectator*. I kept getting a busy signal. I settled for coffee and left home. As I swung out of the driveway, a navy blue Chrysler with twin mounted spotlights and no chrome pulled away from the curb behind me.

It was still in my mirror when I found a slot in front of the *Spectator* office. I went inside, where everyone on the floor was hunched over his desk arguing with a telephone. Rube Zendt hung his up just as I took a seat in the chair in front of his desk. "The damn *Free Press*," he said, pointing at the instrument. "They want the rundown on Stillwell before we even print it. Those city sheets think they wrote the First Amendment."

"Which desk is Stillwell's?"

"Why?"

I counted on my fingers. "Stillwell gives me a man to see about a dog. A cross-eyed sergeant at the cophouse sees us talking. I see the man. Last night Stillwell calls me, sounding sloshed and telling me to forget the man. This morning

the cops scrape Stillwell out of an alley."

"Empty lot."

"In Detroit we call them alleys. I'm not finished. This morning I've got a tail that might as well have UNMARKED POLICE CAR painted in big white letters on the side. Someone's scared. I want to know what makes Stillwell so scary. Maybe he kept notes. He's a newspaperman."

"I can't let you go through his desk. Only Stillwell can do that. Or George Strong. He publishes the *Spectator*."

"I know who Strong is. Where is he?"

"Lady, we don't need no warrant. We're in hot pursuit of a suspect in an assault and battery."

This was a new player: I turned in my chair and looked at a pair of hulks in strained jackets and wide ties standing just inside the front door dwarfing a skinny woman in a tailored suit. One, a crewcut blond with a neck like a leg, spotted me and pointed. "There he is."

I got up. "Back way."

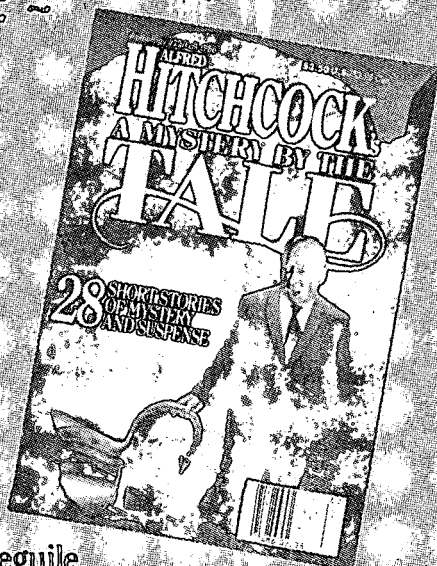
Zendt jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "End of that hall. Good luck." He stuck out his hand. I took it hastily and brought mine away with a business card folded in it.

The detectives were bumping into desks and cursing behind

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me when I made the end of the hall and sprinted out the back door. I ran around the building to my car. One of the cops, gray-ing with a thick mustache, had doubled back and was barreling out the front door when I got under the wheel. I scratched pavement with the car door flapping. In the mirror I saw him draw his revolver and sight down on the car. I went into a swerve, but his partner reached him then and knocked up his elbow. I was four blocks away before I heard their siren.

I backed the car into a deserted driveway and unfolded the card Zendt had given me. It was engraved with George Strong's name, telephone number, and address on Lake Shore Drive in Grosse Pointe Farms. I waited a little. When I was sure I couldn't hear the siren any more I pulled out. My head stayed sunk between my shoulder blades until I was past the city limits.

It was one of the deep walled estates facing the glass-flat surface of Lake St. Clair, with a driveway that wound through a lawn as big as a golf course, but greener, ending in front of a brownstone sprawl with windows the size of suburbs. I tucked the Chevy in behind a row of German cars and walked around the house toward the pulse of music. I should have packed a lunch.

Rich people aren't always throwing parties; it's just that that's the only time you catch them at home. This one was going on around a wallet-shaped pool with guests in bathing suits and designer-original sundresses and ascots and silk blazers. There was a small band, not more than sixteen pieces, and the partygoers outnumbered the serving staff by a good one and a half to one.

George Strong wasn't hard to spot. He had made his fortune from newspapers and cable television, and his employees had dutifully smeared his face all over the pages and airwaves during two unsuccessful campaigns for state office. His tow head and crinkled bronze face towered four inches over his tallest listener in a knot of people standing by the rosebushes. I inserted some polyester into the group and introduced myself.

"Do we know each other?" Strong looked older in person than in his ads. His chin sagged and his face was starting to bloat.

"It's about one of your reporters, Ed Stillwell."

"I heard. Terrible thing. The company will pay his bills, even though the incident had nothing to do with the newspaper. I understand he was drunk when they mugged him."

"Nobody mugged him. I think

he was beaten by the police.”

“Excuse us, gentlemen.” He put a hand on my arm and steered me toward the house.

His study was all dark oak and red leather with rows of unread books on shelves and photographs of George Strong shaking hands with governors and presidents. When we were on opposite sides of an Empire desk I told him the story. Unconsciously he patted the loosening flesh under his chin.

“Ridiculous. The police in Iroquois Heights aren’t thugs.”

“Two of them tried to arrest me for Stillwell’s beating in the *Spectator* office half an hour ago, without a warrant. They followed me there from my house, where they have no jurisdiction. Your classifieds editor gave me your card. Call him.”

He didn’t. “I won’t have my reporters manhandled. You say you want to go through Stillwell’s desk?”

I said yes. He took a sheet of heavy stock out of a drawer and scribbled on it with a gold pen from an onyx stand. He folded it and handed it to me. “I’ll pay double what the woman’s paying you to forget the dog and find out who beat up Stillwell.”

“Save it for your next campaign. If my hunch is right I’ll find them both in the same spot.” I put the note in my pocket and took myself out.

The navy blue Chrysler was parked across the street from the newspaper office when I came around the corner from where I’d left my car. There was only one man in it, which meant his partner was watching the back door. I ducked inside a department store down the block to think.

There was a fire exit in Men’s Wear with a warning sign in red. The clerk, slim and black in a gray three-piece, was helping a customer pick out a necktie by the dressing rooms. I pushed through the door.

The alarm was good and loud. Mustache had gotten out of the car and was hustling through the front door when I rounded the building and trotted across the street to the *Spectator*. The skinny woman in the tailored suit read Strong’s note and pointed out Ed Stillwell’s desk.

Reporters are packrats. While I was sifting through a ton of scrawled-over scrap, Rube Zendt came over and leaned on the desk. “Cops are watching the place,” he said.

“Do tell.”

“The older one with the mustache is Sergeant Gogol. The wrestler’s Officer Joyce. They’re meaner than two vice principals. When you’re ready to go, hide in the toilet and I’ll call in Joyce from the back—tell him Gogol’s got you out front or something—and you can duck

out the rear. It worked once."

"I guess you scribblers look out for each other."

"Stillwell? Can't stand the bald son of a bitch. But ink's thicker than blood." He strolled back to his desk.

Ten minutes later I found something that looked good, one half of a fifty dollar bill with a scrap of paper clipped to it and "9 P.M. 8/8 OHS" penciled on the scrap in Stillwell's crooked hand. Today was the eighth. The torn-bill gag was corny as anything, but that was Iroquois Heights for you. I pocketed it, got Zendt's attention, and went to the bathroom.

I spent the rest of the day in a Detroit motel in case the cops went to my house or office. From there I called Elda Chase to tell her I was still working and to ask if she'd heard anything. She hadn't. I watched TV, ordered a pizza for dinner, and left three slices for the maid at eight thirty.

The old high school was lit up like Homecoming when I presented myself at the open front door. A security guard in khaki asked me if I was there for the parents' meeting. I handed him the half-bill. He looked at it, dug the other half out of a shirt pocket, and matched them. Then he put both halves in the pocket. "You're Stillwell?"

"Yeah."

"I heard you was in the hospital."

"I got out." I passed him ahead of any more questions.

A meeting was going on somewhere in the building; voices droned in the linoleum and tile halls. Acting on instinct I headed away from them, stepping around a folding gate beyond which the overhead lights had been turned off. A new noise reached me: louder, not as stylized, less human. It increased as I passed through twin doors and stopped before a steel one marked BOILER ROOM. I opened it and stepped into tropical heat.

I was on a catwalk overlooking the basement, where twenty men in undershirts or no shirts at all crouched around fifteen square feet of bare concrete floor, shouting and shaking their fists at a pair of pit bulls ripping at each other in the center. From the pitch of their snarls it was still early in the fight, but already the floor was patterned with blood.

The door opened behind me while I was leaning over the pipe railing trying to get a look at the men's faces. I stepped back behind the door, crowding into a dark corner smelling of cobwebs and crumbling cement. I wished I'd brought my gun with me. I'd thought it would slow me down.

Two men came in and stood with their backs to me, close enough to breathe down their collars. I recognized Henry Revere's white head and green workclothes. The other man's hair wasn't much darker. He was taller and white, wearing a gray summerweight suit cut to disguise an advanced middle-age spread. From the back he looked familiar.

"Which dog's that?" wheezed the man in the suit. I knew that broken windpipe.

"Lord Baltimore," said Revere. "Bart. He's new."

"He doesn't have the weight to start out that hard. He'll fold in five."

"That's a bull for you. Shepherds pace themselves."

"Shepherds are pansies. I told you not to buy any more."

"I gots to buy something. We're running out of dogs."

"Sell what you got. I'm jumping this racket."

"Man, I don't like the other. That's heat with a big *H*."

"*I'm* the heat."

"What if one of them cons talks to the press?"

The man in the suit coughed. "Why'd he want to? What other chance he got to miss a stretch in Jackson? He should thank us."

"Not if he gets beat half to death like that reporter."

"Gogol and Joyce got carried away. They were supposed to

just rough him around, maybe break something. Anyway he had his slice. He should've stood on his tongue."

"What I mean," Revere said. "If he talked, so could a con. And what about that detective?"

"I got men everyplace he goes. His wings are clipped."

"You say so, chief. I feel better when he's grounded."

A shrill yelp sheared the air. Then silence.

"There, you see?" said the man in the suit. "No distance."

The door opened again. I squeezed tight to the wall. The pair turned, and I got a good view in profile at Acting Chief of Police Mark Proust's long slack face. His complexion matched the gray of his suit.

"Chief, that guy Stillwell's here. Thought I better tell you." The security man's voice was muffled a little on the other side of the open door.

"Impossible. What'd he look like?"

"About six feet, one eighty-five, brown hair."

"That's not—"

I hit the door with my shoulder, occupying the guard while I shoved Proust into the railing. Revere moved my way, but his short leg slowed him down. I swept past him and threw a right at the guard, missing his jaw but glancing off the muscle on the side of his neck. He lost

his balance. I vaulted over him.

"It's Walker!" Proust shouted.
"Use your gun!"

Flying through the twin doors in the hall, I sent a late dog rooter sprawling. Behind me a shot flattened the air. The bullet shattered the glass in one of the doors. I reached the folding gate, but the opening was gone; the guard or someone had closed and locked it. The guard was coming through the broken door, behind his gun. I ducked through a square arch in the wall, stumbled on stairs in the darkness, caught my equilibrium on the run, and started taking them two at a time heading up. A bullet skidded off brick next to my right ear.

I ran out of stairs on a dark landing. Feet pounded the steps behind me. I felt for and found a doorknob. It turned.

Cool fresh air slid over me down a shaft of moonlight. I was on the roof with the lights of Iroquois Heights spread at my feet. I let the heavy door slam shut of its own weight, got my bearings, and made for the fire chute. I had a foot over the edge when the security guard piled out the door and skidded to a halt, bringing his gun up in two hands. Gravity took me.

The inside of the tube smelled of stale metal. My ears roared as I slid a long way, as if falling in a dream. Then I leveled out and my feet hit ground and in-

ertia carried me upright and forward. Officer Joyce, standing at the bottom, pivoted his bulk and brought his right arm down with a grunt. A fuse blew in my head and I went down another chute, this one bottomless.

I awoke with a flash of nausea. My scalp stung and an inflated balloon was rubbing against the inside of my skull. I got my eyelids open despite sand in the works, only to find that I was still in darkness. This darkness stank. As I lay waiting for my pupils to catch up, I grew aware of an incessant loud yapping and that it was not in my head. Then I identified the smell. I was in a kennel.

Not quite in it, I thought, as objects around me assumed vague shape. I was lying on moist earth surrounded by wire cages with wet black muzzles pressed against the wire from inside and eyes shining farther back. These were the quiet ones. The others were setting up a racket and hurling themselves against the doors and trying to gnaw through the wire.

My arms had gone to sleep. I tried to move them, and that was when I found out my wrists were cuffed behind me. My ankles were bound, too, with something thin and strong that chafed skin; twine or insulated

wire. I rolled over onto my face and worked myself up onto my knees. The balloon inside my head creaked.

Something rattled, followed by a current of air that sucked in light. The walls were gray corrugated steel. A pair of shiny black Oxfords appeared in front of me and I looked up at Mark Proust. The battery-powered lantern he was carrying shadowed the pouches in his paper-pulp face.

"Cut his legs loose," he said. "He isn't going anywhere."

Feet scraped earth behind me. A blade sawed fiber and my ankles came apart. I got up awkwardly with my wrists still bound. Circulation needled back into my lower legs.

"When was the last time, snoot? The Broderick kill?"

I said nothing. Officer Joyce joined Proust, folding a jack-knife. The crewcut gave his face a planed look, like a wooden carving with the features blocked in for finishing later.

"Shut up those dogs," Proust said.

I hadn't realized Henry Revere was present. The old black man came up from behind me and kicked the cage containing the loudest of the dogs. The dog, a sixty pound pit bull, stopped barking and shrank back snarling. He kicked two more. The third dog hesitated, then lunged, fangs biting wire. Revere kicked

again and it yelped and cowered. Its eyes glittered in the shadows at the rear of the cage. The rest of the animals fell into a whimpering silence. Two of the cages contained shepherds.

"Know where we are, snoot?" asked Proust.

"The Iroquois Heights Police Academy," I said. "Those are some of your new rookies."

"Funny guy. It's my little ten-acre retirement nest egg six miles out of the Heights. The old high school's nice, but it's too close to everything."

"Makes a good front, though," I said. "Like dog fighting, which is illegal but forgivable in case someone starts prying. Maybe he won't think to look further and find the real racket."

"What's that, snoot?"

I said nothing again.

"Smart." He smirked at Joyce and Revere. "A smart private nose is what we got here. Only he just thinks he's smart. Thinks if he acts dumb we'll let him go on breathing. Which makes him dumb for real."

I shrugged. "Okay. I heard enough to know you've graduated from fighting dogs to fighting inmates, probably from downtown holding. In return for their release or a word to the judge they agree to fight each other, probably in front of a crowd that's outgrown betting on dogs. Your piece of the gate must be sweet."

"It pays the bills. Especially when we put a black in the pit with a white. A lot of the residents here left Detroit to get away from the blacks. No offense, Henry."

"I'm surprised you didn't put one in with Stillwell."

"He wouldn't have lasted two minutes. Gogol and Joyce almost killed him without even trying." He paused, tasting his next words. "I figure you for a better show."

"I was wondering when we were coming to that."

"You might win, who knows?"

"What do I win, a bullet?"

"Warm up if you want. People are still coming. I'll send someone back for you." He went out, trailing Joyce and Revere. A padlock rattled.

It was a truss barn with a high roof and some moonlight seeping through cracks between the bolted-on sections. The cage doors were latched with simple sliding bolts. I backed up to them and worked them loose, hoping the agitated dogs inside wouldn't chew off my fingers. I left them engaged just enough to keep the doors closed. A good lunge would slip any of them. I came to the shepherds last. In the gloom either of them could have been the dog in the picture Elda Chase had given me.

"Max."

One of them barked sharply.

I called again. It barked again. The other looked at me and gave a rippling snarl. Just to be sure I left both cages locked. They were safer inside.

Some of the cages were empty and I sat on one. I wanted a cigarette but I didn't fidget. The last thing I wanted to do was startle a dog into breaking loose while I was still present.

After a long time of measured breathing and sweating beyond measure, I heard the lock rattle again and Gogol and Joyce came in. I stood. The detective with the mustache held his revolver on me while his partner led me out. Gogol followed with the gun.

We walked twenty yards through a jumble of cars parked on rutted earth to a steel barn bigger than the one we had just left. Henry Revere passed us coming out the door. He was going back to see to the dogs.

The interior was lit with electric bulbs strung along the tops of the walls. Crude bleachers had been erected on either side of a hole dug five feet deep and eight feet in diameter and lined with rough concrete. The bleachers were jammed with men and some women, all talking in loud voices that grew shrill when we entered. This building smelled as strong as the other, but the stink here was sharper, more foul, distinctly human. Proust sat in

the middle of the front row.

We stopped at the edge of the pit and Joyce unlocked my handcuffs. Inside the pit stood a black man wearing only faded bluejeans. His hair was cropped short and his torso was slabbed with glistening muscle. He watched me with yellowish eyes under a ridge of bone.

I was rubbing circulation back into my wrists when Joyce shoved me into the pit. My opponent caught me and hurled me backward. I struck concrete, emptying my lungs. The crowd shrieked. He charged. I pivoted just in time to avoid being crushed between him and the wall. He caught himself with his hands, pushed off, and whirled. I hit him with everything, flush on the chin. He shook his head. I threw a left. He caught it in a hand the size of my office and hit me on the side of the head with his other fist. I heard a gong.

I backpedaled, buying time for my vision to clear. He followed me. I kicked him in the groin and punched him in the throat; he was no boxer and had left both unprotected. They didn't need protecting. He wrapped a hand around my neck and reared back. "Sorry, man."

The fist was coming at me when a woman in the crowd screamed. The scream was higher and louder than any of

the others and it made him hesitate just an instant.

I didn't. I doubled both fists and brought them up in an up-percut that tipped his head back and snapped his teeth together and broke his grip on my neck. Then I put my head down and butted him in the chest. He staggered back, spitting teeth.

The whole crowd was screaming now, and not at us. A torn and bleeding Henry Revere had stumbled into the building trailing a pack of enraged dogs that were bounding through the audience, bellowing and slashing at limbs and throats with the madness of fear and anger and pain. One, a red-eyed pit bull, leaped over the concrete rim and landed on my dazed opponent and I clubbed it with my forearm before it could rip out his throat. Stunned, the dog sank down on all fours and fouled the pit.

"You all right?" I asked.

He got his feet under him, a hand on his throat. It came away bloody, but the skin was barely torn. "I guess."

"What'd they promise you, a clean ticket?"

"Probation."

"Give me a leg up and maybe you'll still get it."

After a moment he complied and I scrambled out of the pit, then stuck out a hand and helped him up. Most of the crowd had cleared out of the

building. One of the dogs lay dead, shot through the head by one of the cops; the report had been drowned in the confusion. Another stood panting and glaze-eyed with its tongue hanging out of a scarlet muzzle. I didn't look for the others. My former opponent and I went out the door.

It was more dangerous outside now than in. Cars were swinging out of the makeshift parking lot, sideswiping one another and raking headlamps over scurrying pedestrians and dogs.

I heard sirens getting nearer. I wondered who had called the cops. I wondered which cops they had called.

A maroon Cadillac swung into the light spilling out the barn door, illuminating Proust's pale face behind the wheel. I shouted at the black man and we ran after it. His legs were longer than mine; he reached the car first and tore open the door on the driver's side and pulled Proust out with one hand. The car kept going and stalled against the corner of the other building.

The black man took a gun from under Proust's coat and hit him with it. I let him, then twisted it out of his grip from

behind. His other hand was clutching the acting police chief's collar. Proust was bleeding from a cut on his forehead.

"Police! Freeze! Drop the gun!"

I did both. A county sheriff's car had pulled up alongside us and a deputy was coming out with his gun in both hands. The door on the passenger's side opened and George Strong got out.

"It's all right," he said. "That's our inside man."

The deputy kept his stance. "What about the other?"

I said, "He's with me."

Strong looked from Proust's half-conscious face to mine. "I bribed the guard at the high school for this spot. I remembered I was a newspaperman and that maybe the biggest story in years was getting away from me. What about the ones who hurt Stillwell?"

"Sergeant Gogol and Officer Joyce," I said. "APB them."

His crinkled face got wry. "Did you find the woman's dog?"

I indicated the other barn. "In there. Take it easy on him," I told the deputy. "Take it easy on all of them."

"You a dog lover or something?"

"No, just one of the dogs." I walked away to breathe.

UNSOLVED

by Hubert Phillips ("Caliban")

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the June issue.

The *Commentator*, that mighty organ of opinion, employs five powerful publicists. Their real names are Arnott, Brisk, Cellini, Dacres, and Ewart; and they write (not necessarily respectively) under the pseudonyms of "Alba," "Jove," "Magnus," "Prospero," and "Thunderer."

The identities of these publicists have been a well-kept secret. The editor of the *Commentator* was much amused recently, when he discovered that each of the five was mistaken as to the identity of each of the other four. Moreover, each of the four pseudonyms not used by each publicist was attributed to him by one of his colleagues. Yet no two publicists attributed the same pseudonym to any one writer.

Cellini, for instance, thought that Brisk was "Magnus." Dacres thought that Ewart was "Alba," and that Cellini was "Prospero." Brisk identified Dacres as "Prospero," while Arnott took Brisk himself to be "Jove" and Dacres to be "Magnus."

Can you now deduce each publicist's pseudonym?

See page 148 for the solution to the April puzzle.

"Commentator," from My Best Puzzles in Logic & Reasoning by Hubert Phillips ("Caliban"). Copyright © 1961 by Dover Publications, New York, N.Y.

Love Always, Mama

by Maggie Wagner-Hankins



“**I** brought your mail up,” I tell Kate as I come through the door into her tiny apartment. The place smells like cinammon and baked apples, and I take a deep breath. The smell is money in the bank.

“Thanks, Trish. Just dump it on the table.” She barely looks up from the goo she’s kneading into bread dough, dough des-

tinued to become Auntie May’s Wholly Good Oatmeal Bread.

Together, Kate and I are Auntie May. She’s the one who does the baking, I’m the one who sells.

There shouldn’t be anything for the business in her mail because we had gotten the post office box, but I still thumb through the half dozen enve-

Illustration by Janet Aulisio

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lopes. It looks as if Kate's on as many mailing lists as I am.

"I think you should buy the siding," I tell her, and then stop as I come to a pale pink envelope exuding an elusive scent—roses, I think. "Hmmm."

"Grab a potholder and make yourself useful," she tells me. "Muffins are done in—" she glances at the timer "—twenty seconds."

When the *ding* sounds, I'm at the ready, and out come twenty-four of Auntie May's Marvelous Muffins—this batch the apple spice variety.

"Perfection!" I breathe in a noseful.

"Of course. Auntie May has very high standards." She is still kneading, but the dough now looks like dough instead of ooze. "Okay, slide that next batch in and set the timer for twenty-seven minutes—exactly."

"You're lucky I came along," I tell her, feeling a little like Dr. Frankenstein's assistant as I carefully slide the muffins into the oven and set the timer for precisely twenty-seven minutes.

"I'd have managed," she says, and although there's a smile on her face, I know she speaks the truth. I've seen her put together a seven course meal for six without missing a beat.

"Anything interesting?" she asks, gesturing toward the mail.

I pick up the stack again. "Let's see—bill, junk, junk, bill, sweepstakes entry—be sure to send that in, Kate." She never does. "Junk. And *this*." I swish the rosy envelope under her nose. "Easter card, perhaps?"

She glances up, mildly interested, checks the handwriting, and halts in mid-knead. For an instant her face lights up in a quiet smile, then she goes back to her kneading. "It's from my mother," she says.

Now it's my turn to stop. "I thought your mother was dead."

"She is," says Kate, thumping the oatmeal colored dough down onto the kneading board.

Another few seconds' delay, and then my brain is functioning again. "So this is from—your stepmother."

"No, from my mother." I see now she's glancing at me from the corner of one eye, and there's a playful twinkle there.

"Okay, a riddle," I say. "So what's the answer?"

"It's not a riddle. It's really from my mother." At last the dough is ready. She plops it into a greased bowl, swirls it around so the top is greased too, and puts a cloth over the whole business, leaving it to rise. "My *dead* mother. She writes letters and sends me cards and things quite often. Through a medium."

This time the delay is longer as I try to gather my wits,

which seem to have scattered to the far corners of the apartment. Presently, I drag them back and find a smile. Still, my mouth can't decide whether it should be a "that's a good joke, Kate" smile or a "Kate, you've been working a little too hard" smile. It tries to be both and ends up being sappy.

With my brain telling me not to take this too seriously, and Kate's expression telling me she's taking it very seriously indeed, I search for something to say. Being the practical type, I finally settle for "Kate, doesn't it seem a little implausible for the dead to communicate with the living, especially on a regular basis?"

"Not really. My mother told me before she died that she'd be in touch. I had no doubt she meant it. I didn't know how, but when you're six, you don't question your parents."

"But you're not six any more."

"I don't have to be. She's been true to her word. Boy, has she! You should see the stacks of stuff I've gotten from her in the past twenty years."

I, of course, am having a horrible time with this, and am grasping at straws. "Kate, are you sure your mother really died?"

"Positive."

"She didn't just maybe go away and—"

"Abandon me? Sorry, but I

saw her lying in her casket. Believe me, she was dead." She smiles and I can't help wondering how she can talk about this in the same tone she uses when discussing whether to use more ginger in the muffins.

Seeming to read my mind, something she's been good at almost since we met over a year earlier, she says, "I know it sounds crazy. But it's just one of those things you either accept or drive yourself nuts trying to figure out. I prefer to accept it. Because what other possibility is there?"

I can think of a few, but I don't want to mention them just now. Instead, I say, "Well, aren't you going to open it?"

She finishes washing the sticky dough off her hands, pours us both coffee, and I trail her into the dining room section of the studio apartment, feeling no compunction about reading over her shoulder.

The card has flowers all over the front, and the words *Happy Easter to a Beautiful Daughter*.

She opens it and reads aloud, "'Dearest Kitten, Another Easter and you're lovelier than ever.'" Smiling indulgently, she shakes her head. "'I'm glad your business is starting to take off. You and your friend Trisha have worked hard and deserve it.'" I have to admit, hearing my own name in this letter sends a tiny stab of cold

down the back of my neck. "Don't forget to recreate once in a while, and keep taking your vitamins. Love always, Mama."

All I can say is, "She sounds like a mother."

Kate smiles, and her smile is a lot of things—amused, loving, even a little sad, but one thing it isn't is incredulous. It's clear she finds nothing disconcerting or surprising about any of this. But then, she's got about twenty years on me in getting used to it.

"You really don't believe it's her, do you?" she asks.

"I'm having a little trouble with it. Why haven't you ever mentioned it before?"

"For precisely this reason. I didn't want to upset you."

"Then why tell me now?" Part of me is wishing I hadn't brought up the mail.

"Because you brought up the mail. Besides, you asked."

We sit there for a few minutes, each busy with our coffee cups and our thoughts. I can't keep my eyes off the envelope. Finally, the words have to come.

"Kate, I'm not trying to be a wet blanket, but could I ask—how you can be so certain it's her, and not just someone who felt sorry for you after your mother died and tried to spare you the grief? With the best of intentions, of course."

There was that self-assured

smile again. "Trisha, you believe what you want. I can't really expect you to believe this. But I know it's her. I can't explain it, I just know."

Not able to give up quite so easily, I grab the envelope, ready to prove a point, and sigh in dismay. The postmark, which I was sure would be from here in Springfield, is from Bridgewater, a little over a hundred miles to the south of us.

When Kate goes out to check the muffins, I follow her and pour more coffee. "Suppose," I begin tentatively, "it really is your mother. Doesn't it bother you to be—I don't know—*watched* all the time? Do you ever feel like you have any privacy?"

"She doesn't watch me all the time. She's given me progressively more privacy as I've grown older, in proportion to what a mother would give you if she were alive. When I was a little girl, I got the feeling she was around more." She laughs. "Especially when I was up to no good. But now she doesn't seem to intrude any more than a living mother would. Maybe even less." I'm sure she's referring to my own mother, who lives four blocks from me and knows what I have for dinner every evening.

Suddenly, the weirdness of the whole thing gets to me, and I turn to Kate, unable to keep the laugh out of my voice. "Tell

me the truth," I say. "You act as if this were the most normal thing in the world. But honestly, doesn't it seem a little—bizarre?"

She breaks out laughing, and for a minute I think she's going to admit that the whole thing is just a joke. Instead, she says, "Honestly? Yes, it's very bizarre. But I've had twenty years to get used to it."

Three weeks pass, and I'm still not used to it. But it's something Kate and I have managed to keep out of our conversations. It's clear to both of us that we're not going to reach a meeting of the minds. At first I watch Kate for signs of—I don't know how to put it except bluntly—having only one oar in the water, but she seems as normal as ever so I finally just give up wondering about it. If she gets any more letters or cards, she doesn't mention it, and I don't bring her mail up for her any more.

Then in October, about the time the leaves are at their most glorious but will soon start to fade, I notice a change in Kate. At first, it's just a sort of melancholy around the eyes. I chalk it up to winter's approach. But when she starts leaving ingredients out of Auntie May's various baked goods, I begin to worry. This is not the Kate I know.

Finally I ask her. She tells me there's nothing wrong.

"Is it because we've expanded too quickly?" I ask her. We've moved the operation into a small store next to a popcorn and candy shop, with whom we share a kitchen.

"No."

"Want to talk about it?"

"No."

"You look like you're coming down with something. Kate, you're not pregnant, are you?"

"No!" It's the first time I've seen her smile in a week.

"What then? Come on, you can tell Auntie May."

"I thought I was Auntie May," she says with the beginnings of a grin.

"Then we're the same person and should have no secrets from each other. So come on, what's the matter?"

She hesitates a moment, then sits down. It's as if the act has released something that's been bottled up for ages, and she starts to cry.

"It's my mother."

Uh-oh. Why am I not surprised?

"What'd she do, tell you I'm a bad influence on you?" The joke falls flat and I could kick myself for even trying to make jokes just now.

"I haven't heard from her in three months. I didn't—get a birthday card from her."

Her birthday was September

20th. I remember because we (and presumably our dates) woke up with horrible hangovers on September 21st, swearing off ouzo forever.

"Trisha, she's never missed sending me a birthday card." She shakes her head and suddenly I can see her at six, when she got the news that her mother was dead. I just want to hug her. "It's like she's—died all over again."

I can think of nothing to say.

Then as she sits there, staring forlornly at her hands, I get an idea.

"Kate, don't you think it's time we tried to find the medium? She might be able to shed some light on this, you know."

Instant hope takes hold in her eyes, and I thank God I've said the right thing. "Of course. She'd know." Then she seems to sink again. "Only I have no idea where to find her. Mama never told me whom she was transmitting through."

But it's all we have, and I'm not about to let it slip through my fingers. "Bridgeway isn't that big," I tell her. "We'll find her."

In fact, though I don't have the heart to tell her just yet, I have a sneaking suspicion it won't be hard to find our medium. All we have to do is look in the obituary section of the Bridgeway newspaper between

sometime in July, when Kate got her last letter, and September 20th.

Bridgeway is a small, friendly town, the sort I sometimes fantasize about my mother's retiring to. One week after Kate and I have "the conversation," we are here, ready to search for Madame X. On the drive up I've told Kate my theory, and she has at least listened. Now she's recapping it as we pull out of the motel where we've left our stuff and head for the office of the *Bridgeway Times*.

"You really think some old woman took me on as a sort of—charity project—and now she's dead and that's why I'm not getting any more—messages?"

"I don't know, Kate. All I know is if that *is* what happened, it wouldn't seem any stranger than what *you* think it's been all this time."

"But how could someone this far away know all that stuff about me?"

"Who knows? Maybe she used to live next door to you when you were a kid or something. Maybe she has relatives in Springfield to keep her posted on what you're doing. I don't know. But it's at least worth checking out."

"I can't argue with that," she says. Much of the fight has gone

out of her. I grow angrier by the minute at this interfering "medium" and her twenty years of good intentions.

The newspaper office is small, clean, and bustling, but the back room with its files is quiet, and we set out on our mission. It doesn't take long. Forty minutes later, we've been through the obituaries in three months' worth of weekly papers, taking down names, ages, and addresses.

Back at the motel, we sort through the names. Maybe I'm guilty of stereotyping, but I put all the women over sixty at the top of the list. I don't think it was a man, and I don't think it was anyone young. We have nine names to start on.

"Now what?" asks Kate.

"Now we go to these houses and see if anyone is there who lived with these people and who might know something."

"You think they're going to tell us, even if they know?"

"Why not?"

She shrugs. "I guess it's worth a try."

Well worth a try, as it turns out. Six names down, and we come to a huge old house that looks as if it's right out of an Alfred Hitchcock movie. I get a feeling about it, but I don't get too excited. I'm not noted for having psychic ability.

Still, when a little old lady with gray hair and a sweet smile answers the door, and then does a double-take when she sees Kate, I have to admit my stomach turns a flip.

The eager blue eyes grow wide. "Kate," she says. And all of a sudden I feel like running.

Of course we don't run. We go in.

In a few minutes the old lady, Ruth Morehouse, has given us the details of her sister Betty's death. "Quick, it was. One minute she was in the prime of health, the next, she'd keeled over of a heart attack."

"I'm sorry," I say.

"Don't be," she assures me. "Best way to go. I'm kind of hoping for it myself." We give a brief explanation of why we're here. She smiles knowingly and says, "Please come this way. I think you'll want to see Betty's room."

Shrine is a more appropriate word.

The room is almost dark until Ruth raises the shades, flooding the place with sunshine. It's apparently remained untouched since Betty's death a little over two months earlier, and it's filled with Kate. It's pretty clear to me that I've been right all along.

I feel rather than hear the breath go out of Kate.

We are drawn to the memorabilia. Sketches of Kate, some

framed and all quite good, dot the dresser and desk. "My sister was an artist, too," Ruth says by way of explanation, then leaves us alone in the room. There are Kate clippings on a bulletin board at one side of a brass bed. One from when she won the bake-off two years ago. One announcing her engagement (broken a month later) to a local banker. One of her when she was twelve and won the spelling bee for her school district. A few with her name on a list of honor roll students. Even the article announcing the opening of Auntie May's.

Kate sees the stationery before I do. She walks to the desk and lovingly picks up the box, which is obviously very familiar to her. There is a gold rose etched on pale peach paper.

She looks at it for a long moment, then puts it down. "*Mother* always loved roses," she says softly, and it is clear that she means, "*Mother* loved roses, too." She has accepted the truth. I wonder if she feels she has lost two mothers.

I go to her and put my arm around her, but there don't seem to be any words. I guess none are needed. She puts her head down and cries for a long time.

When we go out, finally, Ruth is waiting with tea. Though neither of us wants to stay, she is persistent, and she *has* opened her home to us, so we sit down

and drink tea and nibble at shortbread cookies.

"My sister really was a talented psychic," she offers without our asking. "She helped many people."

"I'm sure she did," I say. "Did she ever live in Springfield?" I expect to hear that she used to live in the same neighborhood as Kate, or went to the same church or something. But Ruth shakes her head.

"Spent her whole life here. Sometimes she talked of going there, though. She said she'd like to see you, Kate, in person that is, before her time came. Shame she never made it. She really did love you."

Kate shakes her head. "How did she—find out about me in the first place? If it wasn't through my mother, I mean?"

"Who's to say it wasn't?" Ruth asks. "As I said, she had the gift. Perhaps your mother did communicate with her."

And then Kate remembers something. "Bridgeway. Yes, I knew there was something familiar about the name of this town. My mother had a cousin who lived down here. But—she died at least a year before Mama did. We came here to the funeral. I remember because I was in kindergarten and I had to leave early that day, and I didn't want to because we were going to tour a bakery."

But though at first the

thought seems to offer a way out of her confusion, Kate finishes by saying, "But I don't see how that could have any bearing on this."

Finally, with the tea drunk and nothing more to say, we thank Ruth Morehouse and drive back to the motel.

The last thing Kate says before we get in the car to leave this town is, "It just doesn't make sense."

Still, in the weeks that follow, she starts to act a little more like her old self again. The grief is there, but she's trying to work through it, to put it behind her. It's an old grief, one that she should have been allowed when she was six years old. Instead it has been delayed for twenty years, and now it's a far more complicated thing than it should have been.

But Kate is strong. The zing comes back to her baking. We get more business and she jumps in with both feet. We even have to hire a third person to help with paperwork and distribution. And all the while Kate progresses.

At last, just before Thanksgiving, the day comes when she bursts into the shop, the old Kate, wearing her glad smile

once more. There is a twinkle in her eye as she looks around the shop, sizing up the day's work.

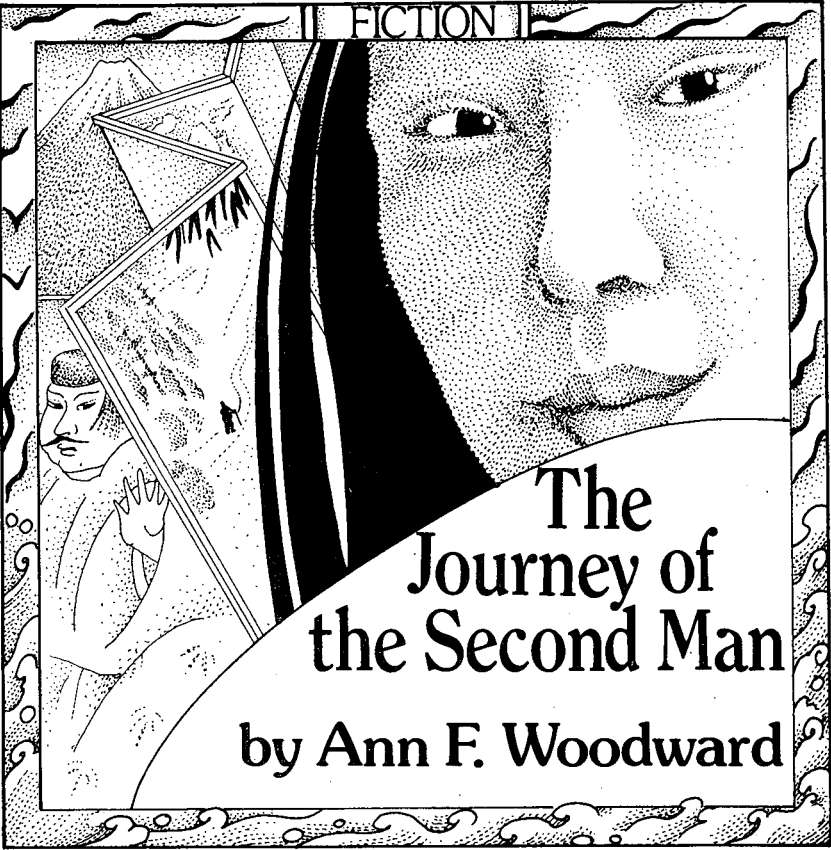
"I'm glad Jody's not in yet," she says, reaching into her purse. She's even got *me* smiling, despite the fact that it's only six o'clock in the morning and I've had just one cup of coffee. "I want to show you something."

She pulls out a lavender envelope and hands it to me. "Look at the card," she says and I slide it out, curious.

An elf sits on a toadstool surrounded by roses, his chin in his hands. Over him are the words *A Belated Birthday Wish*.

I try not to jump to conclusions, but I can't seem to stop the tremor that runs through me as I open the card, skipping the verse and going to the large, somehow familiar script.

Dearest Kitten, I'm so sorry this is late. You have no idea how hard it is to find a receptive vessel on the spur of the moment. I hope your birthday was the best yet, and I'm very pleased to see things taking off for Auntie May's. Betty Morehouse sends her love. Have a Happy Thanksgiving! Love always, Mama.



The Journey of the Second Man

by Ann F. Woodward

On a warm day late in the Ninth Month, an official entered the palace grounds through the Suzaku Gate and toddled—he had still not quite recovered from last night's drinking—to the back entrance of the Palace of the Eight Ministries. Others like him, dressed in court robes,

thick wooden clogs, and black hats made of lacquered gauze, composed in their bearing, holding on display their flat ivory sticks that were wands of office, passed in both directions and bowed slightly to acknowledge his greetings. The light of the sun filtered through a high mist, shapes in the distance

—pines, sedge roofs—were dimmed and blurred in outline. But the colors of long robes, of bright underrobes seen in layers at the edges of sleeves, of brocade trousers and court trains, were intense against the sand of the courtyard. They made his head throb with aching.

He walked along the white walls of the Chinese-style building, flinching from reflected brightness, and mounted stone steps to a stone portico edged with huge red pillars which supported a heavy roof of glazed green tiles. Inside was the hall where they all waited, if there was to be an audience with the emperor or until someone was ready to receive them, and beyond that were the offices of government. It was also a place for informal contact among officials. His own office was not here but, sometime during the past year, his disappointment with that fact had led him to come every day and mingle with those who had come on business. He passed in conversation from group to group of waiting men, as if he would soon go along to his proper place in the building. Here in the busy hall he would meet his secretary by arrangement. They would confer and then the secretary would return to the small building on Suzaku Avenue

where all their business was done and which the official had passed on his way to the gate.

His name was Kiyohara no Tadami and he was Director of the Bureau of Education, an insignificant post in the Ministry of Ceremonials which he thought beneath him. He was twenty-eight years old and had still not risen above the Fifth Rank. In the depths of his mind lived the knowledge that he would never be able to change the color of his trousers and rise into the Fourth Rank, which he considered his birthright. The Fifth Rank was often a graveyard for those who could not advance, who stayed on in minor posts in spite of fine lineage and education, who grew drunken as middle-aged chamberlains or directors among much younger men until shame forced them to retire and busy themselves privately. Kiyohara no Tadami valued his wand of office because he might never have another one. But he slighted his work, standing about in the crowd of higher officials, talking, listening, being affable and respectful and never concerning himself about the Imperial University, which the best families now shunned. When he saw his secretary, he would wander discreetly to a corner and talk with him there, settling in five minutes all the

day's concerns. The secretary's name was Ohara.

"Master Director," he said.

The director, face stern and impatient, did not look at Ohara or answer him.

"Today we have a problem,"

Ohara went on. "The sons of the eastern lord have suddenly arrived to be admitted to the university."

"We expected them?"

"We expected two but he has sent eleven."

"The eastern lord has eleven sons of university age?"

"No, no, no. He has sent a large group of the sons of his clan. But the university is full, we have no room for so many."

Allowing himself to think that the university was full—really, it was a possibility; really, if the secretary said so—the director pushed from his mind the image of the weedy courtyard and dusty rooms of the building across the street from the Suzaku Gate. His feeling was that, because it was in his charge, it must be flourishing like the nearby family schools of the ruling clan and of the Ariwaras. Bending his bleary eyes to the secretary's face he was decisive, "Make room."

"I am afraid . . . It will mean turning someone out of his house."

"You know those eastern

lords, they have wide lands and they are becoming so powerful that they speak like the tiger. One cough . . ."

The secretary smiled. "As does the Lord Director."

"Unh." Pleased, the director looked off into the crowd. On the secretary's face the smile hardened and he looked down. After a few more mumbled exchanges, he left by a side door.

Ohara's office was in a corner of the university building, where the scribe sat at a low table by the window. These two, with the director and a messenger, were the whole of the Bureau of Education.

"We must send a letter to Master Wakeh. Say that his house is needed." Master Wakeh was one of the professors, called by the title *sensei*.

The scribe, a young man with no prospects, repeated after him, "His house is needed," picked up his brush and wrote with a bland face, thinking all the while of a girl in his neighborhood who had been so indiscreet as to let herself be seen on her verandah in daylight.

The messenger went on foot and handed in the letter at the gate of Wakeh-sensei's house. An aged servant took it down the hall, knelt, and rattled a scarred sliding panel. The sounds of misery that now never stopped in that house came

from behind it. Sensei opened the door and slid it shut behind him. "She is bad today." He was apologizing for the painful moans that distressed them both. "She cannot keep still, with these spasms. Ah, well. You have seen how she is twisted."

The old woman gripped her hands on her knees and sat looking at him. "It is too much."

"Yes. Too much for any one person, too much to bear." He looked at the paper crumpled between her thumb and forefinger. "What is this?"

"Ah. A letter. I almost forgot."

Thanking her, he moved farther down the hall and opened another room to find light, a tall man with the rounded shoulders of a scholar. Unfolding the letter, he read.

All these things became known a week later to the Lady Aoi as she heard the disgraceful story of how the Director of the Bureau of Education had turned Wakeh-sensei and his painfully ill wife out of their house. The princess whom she served as lady-in-waiting had come home for a visit to her father, the Great Minister of the Right, and early on a rainy evening he was sitting with her. Aoi and three of the princess' ladies

were also present. A servant came and bowed to his master.

"That young student, my lord, he is still at the gate and he refuses to leave. We are afraid of attracting attention if people see him sitting there in the rain. And he is most intemperate in his speech, he says he will stay as long as necessary, until you see him."

The minister, who had been making the princess laugh with an imitation of her aunt, regarded the man with brooding eyes, almost unwilling to acknowledge that he had heard him. Aoi could see his shoulders let down with tiredness.

"Why does he come to my home?" he asked the man, and then answered himself, "Yes, yes, I know." The minister was not the head of the government, but he was its moving force, the one with energy for overseeing the details of administration and imagination for anticipating problems. At court he was surrounded by a large staff, the classic figure of power, besieged, held in awe. No man as simple as a university student would even be able to approach his office because it was in the palace grounds, where students could not enter. Letters thought by his secretaries to be unimportant did not reach him. Aoi knew the value to the minister of his time at home, when he

changed to loose clothing and concerned himself with domestic trivialities. Like the princess' aunt, who thought her niece should have children.

With a nod the minister gave permission to bring the student.

"I will take him to the small reception room," the man said.

"No, no, Father. Let him come here. We would be diverted to hear you speak to this rash student."

He looked at the princess quizzically. "You think I will make fun of him or be overbearing and rude? When even to your complaining aunt I was polite?" They laughed as his face drew into a long grimace of propriety and he imitated the aunt's voice, "She was raised without a mother..." touching his sleeve to his eye, "—my poor younger sister, that she should have died so soon after the birth of her child!—and you must teach her. Perhaps she doesn't understand the importance of strengthening..." His comical look of amazement indicated that he had upset the aunt by taking this the wrong way. Then he resumed the long face, the flutey voice, and finished with emphasis, "... the *family*, strengthening the family with sons and daughters."

The princess was laughing with a freedom Aoi seldom saw

in her. Relations with her husband were not easy, and it seemed that only here in her father's house could she allow herself laughter and a little carelessness. Here there was no need to protect against slighting neglect. While he made little jerky movements with his robe, continuing to display the aunt's impatience with his levity, Aoi and Lady Takumi moved the curtain frames so that the ladies would be concealed when the student came. Lady Omi moved the cushions to align them, but the minister motioned to Aoi and indicated that she should sit just behind him. Ladies-in-waiting were not so strictly concealed as princesses, though a fan would always cover their faces.

Escorted by two guards, the student came. His attitude was of anger masked by respect for the minister. He was young, perhaps eighteen, and his freshness, his smooth vigor, the shine of his hair which was bound up under his cap, the bloom of his skin, almost made Aoi catch her breath. She felt a brief ache in her throat. He was putting himself at risk for something that, with the seriousness of a man just about to enter the world and find his influence, he had made his own cause. For just a moment, Aoi could have sobbed to see such

passion, which could destroy his life before it was begun. But her usual curiosity and watchfulness prevailed and, as she so often did, she chided herself. Do not be so easily drawn into this, he has others to be tender for his youth.

"Ariwara no Masso, Your Excellency," the student said.

The minister, weighty with the dignity of his office, made a slight sound of acknowledgment but did not speak.

"I am a student at the Imperial University, where I will soon be finished with my studies, if I am so fortunate as to pass my examinations. You perhaps thought that, as an Ariwara, I would have been educated in my family's school. But I have such reverence for Wakeh-sensei's teachings and for his example of the life of a good man that I persuaded my father to let me enter there."

"Who is your father?"

"He is the Vice-Governor of Kyushu."

"Ah." This partly explained the student's presence. Normally such a young man would use the influence of his father in making requests. But this one's father was away in the provinces.

"And you have some trouble?" The minister's manner was as serious and respectful as if he addressed the boy's father.

"Not I, my lord. It is Wakeh-sensei's trouble, though he would never take it up himself. He follows the sage Confucius in all things and will not protest wrong done to him."

"Yes, Wakeh-sensei is famous for that. I didn't realize he was still teaching. We all learned propriety from him when we were your age."

A flash from the student's eyes showed that he thought his teacher a master of more than propriety. The teachings of Confucius were the heart of all gentlemanliness, as well as the ethical framework for government and social relations.

"Perhaps you know the saying of the sage," the student said. "When you are summoned, then go; when you are dismissed, then leave and conceal your face from the world."

"He has been dismissed, then?"

"They have sent him a letter. They want him to leave his house, though his wife is dying. He wrote to them but there was not even an answer." The student did not lose his deferential respect, though feeling deepened his voice. The minister listened with a grave face, not commenting. "Sensei will not show his distress," the student continued. "He only said, 'That this university, of which I have thought myself an orna-

ment . . . ' Then he was angry with himself and forbade me to speak of it to anyone at all."

"Yet you have come to me."

"I am afraid I am like the sage's disciple, Tzu-lu—too quick to action."

"But the university is under the Bureau of Education."

Here the student's gravity and respect dropped away. "Do you know that fool of a man? He struts . . ."

"Fool?" The minister's word was a bark that shocked the student. "Has sensei not taught you that one does not criticize a government in which one has no part?"

All confidence drained from the student, he flushed and shook. Aoi on her cushion was careful not to move by the least quiver, preserving the intensity of the student's lesson in diplomacy. The minister was now sorrowful and distant. "What is your request?"

"I . . . I . . ." His voice croaked and then he burst out, "Wakeh-sensei should not have to move. He should be the most honored teacher in the university."

"I agree. I will look into it." The minister then said with gentle emphasis, "If you must leave, it grieves us to see you go."

The student, embarrassed and confused, showed now his firm-

ness of character. "Tzu-lu always thanked the master for correcting him." He moved to the door where the guards knelt and placed himself between them. "I have disturbed you at home. My one consolation is that I have found respect for my teacher even here among the clouds." He bowed himself out.

"Surely, Father," the princess said, as Lady Takumi and Lady Omi pushed aside the curtains, "there is no need for you to concern yourself with this trifling matter."

The minister only looked at her. Aoi knew that his success was largely because he made all details his business, though he might not allow his hand to be seen. He seemed now disappointed that his own daughter understood him so little. Shrugging in a mild way, he asked Aoi to see him out and rose to leave. In the corridor he stopped her.

"You can help me, if you will. I truly do not have time to look into this and it would not be proper for me to question a decision of the Director of the Bureau of Education. Please go to Wakeh-sensei and tell him I have a house for him and will assist him."

Aoi was pleased to be given a chance to see again this old teacher, who had been a friend of her father. She went to the

house next day and found it empty. Neighbors did not know where he had gone.

That evening, before she had a chance to tell him of her failure to find the teacher, the minister spoke to her. "I have had letters all day about this university scandal. Former pupils of Wakeh-sensei are everywhere in the government, and they have somehow heard about it. They complain of the director and say he must be removed. I want to investigate, but it must be done quietly."

He said he had sent word that the student should find sensei and report his whereabouts, and that the director and his secretary had been summoned and would soon arrive. Aoi's help was needed to make sure the student should not meet the men from the Bureau of Education. "We must protect that young man and not let them know of his involvement. He may yet outgrow his rashness and become a good official. We have need of young followers of Wakeh-sensei in this government."

Aoi started down the eastern corridor toward the main gate. On her way, she passed the small reception room and was surprised to meet the student emerging from it. He looked at her with open mouth and eyes that did not focus. She spoke to

him, "Have they put you in there? Isn't someone else in that room?"

He saw her then and there was an appeal in his face which she understood only when she slid the door completely open and looked in. A man lay sprawled on the floor, another one stood flat against the wall, his arms outspread, his wand of office chattering against the panel painted with a mountain scene.

Aoi stood frozen, comprehending that a man seemed to have been attacked and that there had been two others present who must be detained. When the student moved to go back toward the gate, she called, "Guard!" and saw him stopped by the appearance of two figures in the light down the corridor.

During the bustle of claims of innocence from the student and the director, of calls and summonings, she went to the fallen man and ascertained that he was dead. He was a plump man with a round face, wearing clothes of simple cut and sober colors: his trousers were the special green of the Sixth Rank, his coat of dark green beaten silk had too much shine to it to be in really good taste, his under-robos were yellow and rust. Crushed beneath him was his black cap, which had appar-

ently fallen off or come untied. She looked carefully for a wound, finding red bruises all over his face and neck but no blood. He seemed to have died from a massive crushing of his throat. Just as she turned away, a faint gleam caught her eye.

He had fallen twisted, so that his chest was turned up, his legs bent toward his left and folded together. The light she had seen came from a single dark drop that was almost invisible against the green of the coat. Looking closely she saw a rounded spot of blood, which, as she watched, suddenly flattened into the cloth and was absorbed. Wondering where it had come from, she searched the body but still could not find broken skin.

The man against the wall had had an ivory wand. This body then must be that of his secretary.

Leaving the director and the student in the charge of his house guards, the minister kept Aoi with him, asking Lady Omi to assure the princess that there was no cause for alarm and to stay with her in her quarters. The main hall would be needed.

"You and I, lady, have a problem to solve. Which of these two has killed this Greater Secretary?"

Aoi described to him the attempted flight of the student

and the scene in the small reception room when she discovered the body. She told him every detail, as she knew he would want her to. When she had finished, he drew from under his sash a small square of white paper and unfolded it for her. On it was a drawing, done in quick, sure strokes of black ink. There was no mistaking the portly, commanding figure of the Great Minister of the Right, the princess' father himself, who with a careless wave of his hand was knocking another figure from a precipice to fall into mist. The second man, holding an abnormally large wand of office, tipsy-looking, was the Director of the Bureau of Education.

"Can you make anything of this?" he said to Aoi.

"Ah, let me think. But where did you get it?"

"The director had it. My men searched him."

"There was only this one?"

The minister laughed. "Ah, lady, you are astute. Yes, there were several and there have been others that have been circulating this past week. We don't know where they come from."

As a way of communicating, Aoi thought, they are certainly powerful. One glance and the idea that the director would be taken from office was firm. Yet

she could not see how this drawing had connection with their problem of which of two men had killed the Greater Secretary.

"We must make our own inquiry into this. One of these two has killed a man, one is blameless. If we can present only the guilty one to the Imperial Police, we spare the other, whose life would be ruined through connection with a murder. I want to be fair to them both. With your help I think we can determine which one did it."

He sent for lamps to relieve the gloom of early evening and arranged that six guards should sit in a row near the door. Seating himself, he arranged a cushion next to him for Aoi. But she, as was her habit, pulled it back and sat down a little behind him. Guards were asked to bring the student first.

The young man now in so much trouble might have been expected to lose courage and regress to childish dependence and fear. Instead, Aoi could see at once that he had firmed to manhood and belief in himself and in the reasonableness of others. The minister was expressionless and yet not threatening in his attitude. He asked first about Wakeh-sensei.

"I cannot find him, Excellency, he has vanished. The

sage says, 'When in a country the right does not prevail, then leave it.' I think that sensei has done what we who know him should have expected. Right has not prevailed at the university and he has removed himself."

Aoi remembered a favorite saying of her father's, which he had taught her during their lessons when she was a child. "When the crooked are set above the straight, men do well to leave," she quoted in Chinese. The student looked at her with surprise. Women did not usually know the foreign classical language, and Aoi could see that he was impressed. The minister did not explain that Aoi's father, a teacher without sons, had, against the custom, taught his only daughter as sons are taught and given her all his love of learning. This learning was both a pleasure and a burden for Aoi, who found that at court she must conceal it or be thought unwomanly and proud. Now it served to change the balance of this inquiry and give weight to her presence as part of it.

On the minister's face was a faint smile. It pleased him that the student should see his respect for a woman's powers.

"So you came to tell us that you could not find sensei. How did you happen to be in that

small reception room? I gave orders to the gateman to take you in the opposite direction."

"He did that. I waited in a room beyond the gate. But—" he flushed—"I became a little impatient and looked out and, seeing that man—that director—seeing that he was leaving, I ran to speak to him."

"He was leaving?"

"Yes, but he backed into the room when I came. And then I saw why he was afraid."

"And when I met you at the door, you had just come there?" said Aoi.

"Yes. I had barely entered the room. The man on the floor was exactly as you found him. I didn't touch him." And now youthful righteousness returned in the student's face, which twisted briefly. "He was the one who wrote the letter that destroyed two lives and drove our teacher from us."

The minister could be seen to sigh, his shoulders sank slightly.

"There are scribes for writing and such letters are dictated only upon instruction from the highest authority. It was the director who removed sensei from his house."

The student, remembering his teachings, became calm, moderating his behavior as a good man should. He offered no more comments and the minister, after a small space

of thought, dismissed him.

Before he could send for the director, there was a disturbance outside the door. Grappling with two guards, the director staggered backward into the room.

"Excellency! That boy killed my loyal secretary. Keep him away from me! Let me tell you how he has threatened us."

After a nod from the minister, the guards released him and he stood facing them. "Do you so handle a man of the Fifth Rank?" He seemed unaware that his robes had rucked up across his shoulders and his hat had tipped onto his forehead during the struggle. Aoi smiled behind her fan, but the minister's courteous expression did not alter.

"Perhaps you would like to..." The minister raised both hands in a hat-straightening gesture. Seeing this, the director put up his left hand, smoothed his hair and pushed back the cap. His right hand, holding the wand, was thrust belligerently behind a sash under his coat. This gave him almost a swagger as he approached, but his bow was exaggeratedly respectful. Aoi thought that he was probably half-drunk.

"Threatened, you said?" The minister was frowning.

"Every day for a week he has

followed me, walking almost on my heels, saying nasty things."

"Why did he do that?"

"Some complaint about an old teacher, I paid no attention. Then here in Your Excellency's own house, he forced his way into the reception room and set upon me. He is not sane, he is one of those crazy youths who are spoiled by their education, made mad for perfection in life."

"And what happened in the room?"

"Why, he choked him to death. When my loyal secretary tried to keep him from me, he choked him. I fought him off for my own safety, but I could not prevent what he did to my man. Just as he was escaping, this lady appeared." He did not bow in Aoi's direction, only indicated her with a nod of his head. "So he was captured. And a lucky thing for me or you might have thought that I had done this terrible thing."

"Do you know anything of this?" The minister laid the little cartoon on the floor.

At first it seemed that the director would be capable only of gaping and gasping for air. His skin paled, then flushed ruddy; his drunken manner chilled to sobriety, and with effort he produced his voice. "This is a piece of childish filth and I am sorry to see that it has reached you. I have labored to

serve in my insignificant post, and under me the university has grown. Why, just the other day we received a large group of students from one of the great eastern lords. I think I may say with modesty that through my influence the teachers have become more modern, not so concerned with fusty Confucianism."

"So?"

"Oh, you will find no students more ready to repeat the old histories than ours are. We drill them well. But we are beginning to teach them also that times change, that the old moral values are just the smallest bit exaggerated and impractical for modern times."

"Ah."

Something in the tone of even this slight utterance from the minister frightened the director, and his mouth clapped shut. There was an awkward silence during which Aoi heard wind in the pines of the garden and the sound of plucked zithers from the princess' rooms. The fresh wind shook the oilflames in the tall paper-shaded lanterns, making shadows across the director's face so that it sometimes seemed there was only a void under his hat.

With a soft command to his men, the minister ended his questioning. Half turning back to plead, then thinking better

of it, the director withdrew. His arm, still set out at the elbow by his grasp of the wand in his belt, gave him an air of command that was entirely inappropriate.

When they were alone, Aoi and the father of the princess she served put their heads together like the old friends they were.

"You see it?" she said to him.

He opened his eyes wide. "No. You are ahead of me again."

She made a negating gesture with her hand. "I have just had more time to think. You were busy with questions."

"You know which one it is, then?"

"Oh, yes. And how we can bring it out. Let us do this." She spoke carefully, showing him what he too had seen, leading him to her own conclusions, suggesting the next step.

Men were sent to open the storeroom and soon returned with a long, cloth-wrapped bundle which they opened, revealing a folding screen. Set up, it was six narrow brocade-bound panels painted in the yamato style and showing a journey. The same gentleman passed from mountains to spacious plains to riverbank through the six scenes. This screen was set up at the minister's left. Two guards were asked to hold it so that it could be opened flat and

they were given careful instructions as to what they should do at a certain moment. Cushions were not provided for the two suspected men, but they would be seated on the floor beside the screen, which would be to their right. The minister meant to tell them a story, using the screen as illustration.

Returning, both the student and the director were pale and looked as if they feared judgment. Distaste for each other exerted a repelling force and created an ever-widening space between them as they crossed the floor, the student walking behind. The minister forced them to sit close together before him.

"I will be indirect in my illumination of what happened in the reception room. Please humor me. This screen," he motioned to the guards who held it and they moved it closer, tipping it forward so that it could be more easily seen, "shows, you see, the life-journey of two men."

"Two?" said the director peering. "Excuse me, I see only one man."

The student was watchful and interested.

"Ah, you cannot see the second man? Wait a bit, I will make him visible," said the minister. "They enter here at the right, you see, walking from

a deep forest on a slope. That is their entrance into the world of men, they have not been known before.

"Now they are climbing this mountain but they are not alone, others go with them. Here they are assisted. That is, the first man is assisted, the second man has his shoulder to the cart of their companions."

The director looked impatiently at the second panel, frowning because he could not see the man who pushed the cart. The student was attentive, a small smile on his face.

"This third panel shows them in the mountains, where you can see there is a large mansion. There are clouds, they are very high up. The first man knocks at the gate himself, he expects admittance. But the second man hangs back, wonders how he can serve the lord of the mansion, he is humble and doubts his qualifications.

"Now we see them on the lord's verandah. The first man eats and drinks, he turns away from the lord who sits before him and reaches for more wine. But the second man sits in attendance, he speaks thoughtfully when he is asked, serves when there is some lack. He does not put himself forward. See how he is behind the lord, just at his elbow?"

"There is no second man," the

director burst out. His right hand still grasped the ivory wand at his waist and this kept his elbow out, which gave him a belligerent attitude. "And this one, he looks to me like a friend of the lord, they sit as equals."

"Yes, that is one way of interpreting it. But it is the lord's manor, remember that. And they are travelers, he honors them but without his assistance they would have no place to lodge.

"Now in the fifth panel they have descended to a wide plain, see the lakes and fruit trees in the distance. It is a good land, cultivated, boundless. And here is our first man, walking with a staff on the one rocky path in the whole country. No one is with him, people have been warned against him. But he doesn't know that, he has never had friends in his travels."

"And the second man," said the student, "where is he?"

"You do not see him now?"

"I think I see his house and that he is at home." The student leaned forward and indicated a roof set in a fold of hills.

The minister smiled. "Yes, this is his country, this wide peaceful land, and he is at home.

"The last panel shows a river. The first man stands on the bank and the boatman will not come for him. But the second man walks on the water—this

brightness here. Do you see it?"

The student smiled with a kind of beauty. "The second man, is he always real?"

"Oh, yes," said the minister. "The second man is always there."

"The man we might have become." The student's youth glowed with the revelation of the minister's meaning. His face was serene and lit with understanding, he was savoring the story and its implications, his smooth eyelids almost closed.

"But I can't . . ." The director leaned toward the screen, the men holding it inclined it more. Suddenly it slipped and fell forward. Putting up his right hand to catch it, the director at last let go of his ivory wand and exposed his hand. Blood marked his wrist and a black bruise had already spread to the base of his thumb. One of the guards deftly caught his arm, the other saved the screen from damage.

Aoi drew in her breath. They had succeeded.

It was only in telling the princess what had happened that Aoi and the minister spoke fully to each other. The intensity of their search for truth had given them time only for the briefest hints of the whole story. Far into the night, refreshed by wine and

hot food provided by servants full of curiosity and willing to stay up and sit listening at the edges of the room, they sat with the princess and her ladies.

"That young Ariwara, I knew he was bringing trouble," said the princess.

"I suppose you are right," said her father. "A righteous young man often stirs the immoral to violent defense."

"But, Father, you must tell us what happened. We know only that a man died."

"It began too long ago to tell, when Kiyohara no Tadami was a youth who expected that his family name would assure his advancement. Or before that, when his father let him mature without good training. And because he was betrayed by his secretary, Director Kiyohara still does not think he has done wrong."

Aoi took up the explanation. The minister was so concerned with the ethical values of the whole incident that his daughter would get the details only by asking endless questions.

"The trouble was that the director did not know what went on in the Bureau of Education. He left everything to his Greater Secretary, who was an ambitious man. When the eastern lord sent many more students than had been expected, he made his chance. He told the

director that more room was needed if they were to teach these extra boys."

"That was not true at all," said the minister. "The Imperial University has declined in recent years, mostly because so many large clans have their own private schools."

"But the secretary wanted an excuse to make trouble and do harm to the director's reputation. So he put Master Wakeh out of his house in a callous way, knowing that many of his former students had grown into power and would resent mistreatment of their revered teacher. He did it without telling the director, who never bothered with the details of his office."

The minister, drawn out of his reveries about the roots of pride, spoke again. "The problem then was that Wakeh-sensei was too good a man to complain. He told no one but his student of what they had done. So the secretary drew little pictures and circulated them—of sensei and his ill wife being driven away, of the pompous director picking up the roof of their house and blowing them out, of the sad old teacher looking at the back of the drunken director."

"Father, how do you know what the secretary did?"

"The pictures came to me, I

saw them. And I knew the director and his pretenses at the Palace of the Eight Ministries, where he thought to make people believe he had his office."

He would have known, too, Aoi thought, of the envious character of the secretary, his handwriting, and his domination in the Bureau of Education.

"But how did this murder occur?" said the princess with a delicate shudder. Aoi answered her.

"That we know exactly because the director broke down and confessed. While they waited in the small reception room, he accused the secretary of causing trouble and struck him with his wand of office, knocking off his hat. When it fell upside down, copies of the latest cartoon were revealed hidden inside. The director became enraged and beat him about the head. Somehow he caught him across the throat with the wand and pulled and twisted until he was dead."

"The director and the student accused each other," said the minister, "but it was Lady Aoi who saw from one drop of blood how we could find out which one of them had killed the man. She had observed carefully and she knew that the secretary had not bled."

Actually, I did not observe

carefully enough because I did not look at his teeth, Aoi was thinking, but she would not mention gruesome details to the princess. The secretary had bitten his attacker.

"There was a drop of blood on the secretary's coat," she said aloud. "But it had not come from him. So we knew that the one who had killed him would have an injury. The director kept his right hand tucked into his sash, somewhat unnaturally, it seemed to us. So we arranged a diversion—the development of which greatly amused your father," she smiled at him, "—and when the director was puzzled and forgetful, an apparent accident made him lift his hand so that we saw blood on his wrist."

"She makes it seem that we were both wise," said the minister. "You would make a good official, my lady."

Tired, they all agreed to go to bed. As Aoi crossed the open corridor that bridged the garden stream where it ran under the house, she found that the minister had followed her. "Come and sit here and we will listen to the water for a while," he said. "I am still too disturbed for sleeping."

The air, black and soft and still warm, was alive with wind. Impeded by rocks, the stream clucked and rippled.

"Do you know, lady, the sage's remark about water?"

"That it pleases the wise because they are flexible?"

"Yes. And about mountains? That the good love mountains because they are secure?"

"Perhaps you are thinking that both streams and mountains are steadfast, as we all should be."

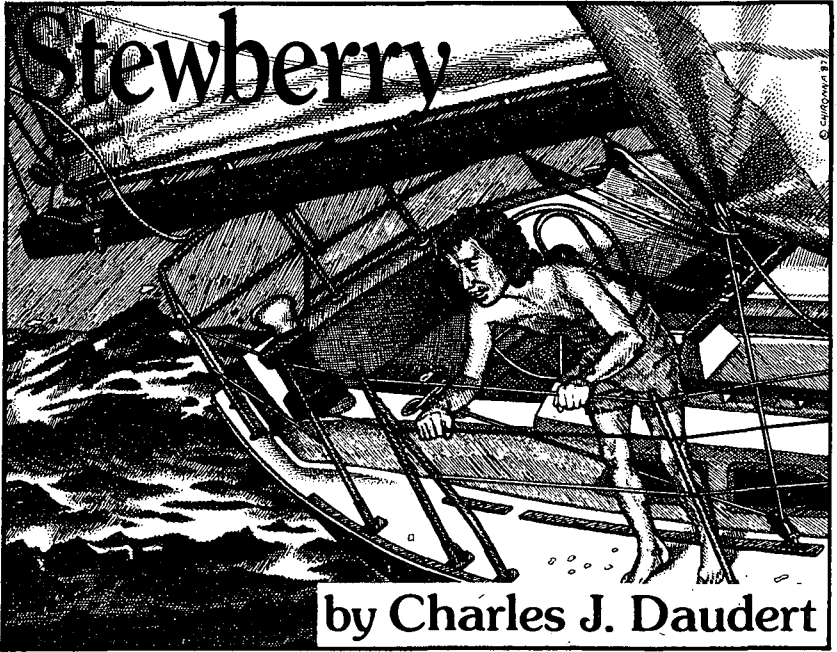
"No, nothing so noble. I am thinking that the stream flows over each rock and knows that it is there. While the mountain is remote, a point of reference only."

"Ah." He was speaking of the director, who had stood above the details of his duties, who had not known the daily flow of affairs.

"That man's real crime was that he was impersonal," said the minister.

Aoi pulled a dried leaf from the hagi shrub beside her and let it fall onto the surface of the water.

"Another quality of streams," she said, "is that they bear away that which is light and insubstantial."



“**N**othing’s more terrifying than the thought of being lost overboard on a dark and windy night.” Those were the words of Henry Blaufisch, Stewart Wenning’s father-in-law, spoken as Henry peered out on a dark and windy Lake Michigan from his Chicago highrise. “That’s why we’ll play it safe, Stewart,” he had said. “I’ll handle the midnight watches.”

Those words echoed in Stewart’s mind as he searched for the faint flicker of Henry’s

emergency light somewhere astern of the yacht *Gilda*. I wonder how it really feels, Henry, he thought and puffed on his cigarette. He felt a strange sense of power, and quiet revenge.

They had left Chicago for the north in mid-September, the start of heavy-wind sailing. “The true sailor’s delight,” his father-in-law had said in an insulting and cheerful voice.

It started less than ten minutes from the harbor, on the first tack.

“Coming over on the port

tack! That's left, Stewart!" the fat man behind the cutter's wheel had shouted to his son-in-law. "Don't get your hair caught in the winch! Reel it in. Reel it in! No one has hair like that any more, son. We're going to get that cut at the next port."

Stewart cranked on the winch until his exhausted muscles could pull the mountain of sail no longer.

"Reverse your grind! Turn the other way!" his father-in-law shouted. "That's a two-speed winch. How many times do I have to tell you that!"

Stewart reversed and the giant genoa jib sail flattened along the side of the boat.

"That's it. Stop. We've got it now," his father-in-law said.

Stewart had green eyes and thick red curls which spilled down on all sides of his shoulders. Freckles appeared everywhere on his short, skinny frame and large blotches spread across his well-defined ribs. He sprawled out in the cockpit with his back against the cabin. He lifted a mug to his mouth and felt the delicate sting of cold beer down his throat.

They were off Northport, Michigan, by the afternoon of the third day. "You're blocking my wind meter," his father-in-law said. "Move to the other side!"

Stewart slid to the opposite cockpit seat and studied his father-in-law. Henry, he said to himself, you're a fat toad.

His father-in-law gripped the steel wheel with both hands. His eyes darted from behind mirror-coated sunglasses to the edges of the sail and down to the electronic wind direction indicator. His vulture-like shoulders and bulging belly had burned pink.

You will hurt tonight, Stewart thought as he rose to go below. Even your knobby knees are burned. And where in the hell did you get those plaid Bermudas?

"Going over on the starboard tack!" Henry bellowed. "Watch the boom!"

"Captain Bligh," Stewart muttered under his breath.

The boom hit a solid thud above Stewart's left ear.

"Stewie! Stewie!" his wife screamed from the cabin hatch. "Dad, what happened to Stewie!"

"He's all right. Aren't you, son?" The face of his father-in-law peered down at him through a fog of pain and his voice came from a distant echo chamber.

"He caught the boom. Tapped him on the head. That's all. You're all right. Aren't you, son?" his father-in-law went on.

"I think Stewie should lie down for a while. Come on, Ste-

wie." Becky, his wife, led him down the companionway steps. "Just lie down there and Becky will take care of you." She wrapped ice cubes in a towel and held the pack to his head.

"Going in!" his father-in-law roared from the cockpit. "Somebody take this wheel while I get the sails down."

"Well, Stewie is real hurt," Becky answered.

"Then you take it. Get up here!" her father ordered.

Two men from the dock tied the boat into a slip at Northport. "I want to see a doctor!" Stewart demanded.

"Damn!" his father-in-law answered.

"Stewie needs a doctor," Becky echoed.

"Is there a doctor here?" his father-in-law asked the harbor master in an angry voice.

"Traverse City is your best bet." The harbor master rubbed his chin. "No one here to handle an emergency. It's Sunday and after six."

Henry broke the silence on the return trip. "Two hundred dollars for a cab fare and a hundred and fifty for emergency room service. The doctor bill comes later. No concussion. No fracture. Nothing."

"Stewie was hurt," Becky cooed. "It could have been real bad. Like the time he smashed his fingers between the boat

and the piling. Or when he dropped the anchor and broke his toe. You said he wasn't hurt then."

His father-in-law was up early in the morning. "No breakfast this morning!" he yelled down the hatch. "Becky can make bacon and eggs on the way to Charlevoix. The wind is just right and it's a long sail. Come on. Shake a leg, Stewart."

"Will this ever end," Stewart said to Becky and shook his head. "Now off to Charlevoix. We were supposed to stay here for a few days."

"Now, Stewie," she said impatiently, hands on her hips. "You know Daddy always changes his mind. Especially when the wind is right. He says it will be a spinnaker run."

"What the hell is that?"

"You know. The big sail out front. The one that is colored and looks like a giant parachute. Daddy says it will be a sleigh ride all the way."

"We'll get that hair cut in Charlevoix!" Henry shouted down the companionway. "Get up here, Stewart. We go out stern first." He motioned Stewart to the dock. "You walk the bow down, give her a hard shove, and swing aboard when we clear the dock."

Stewart walked down the dock and pushed on the bow. The

bow swung out. His body stretched as the gap between the dock and the boat widened.

"Jump!" his father-in-law yelled with a scornful look.

Stewart gripped the rail and the momentum of the boat pulled his feet from the dock. His eyes widened and he swung against the side of the boat. Fear spread across his face and he fought for a toehold along the slippery side of the boat.

"Not that way, you idiot!" his father-in-law screamed.

Stewart grabbed for the lifeline with his right hand and missed. Pain shot through the splintered finger of his left hand and he slid down the side of the boat and splashed into the water.

"Help! I can't swim!" he sputtered as he surfaced.

A woman ran down the dock and threw him a line. She pulled him to the dock and he climbed a ladder and sat down.

His father-in-law jockeyed the boat back into the slip and the woman took the bow line. She cleated the bow line to the dock and his father-in-law jumped from the stern, line in hand, and looped it around the end post.

"Oh! Stewberry!" Becky cried as she jumped down to the dock. "Are you okay, honey?"

Stewart nodded and bent his head between his knees. The

world swirled around him and a sick knot moved up and down in his stomach.

Henry squinted at Stewart from behind his mirrored sunglasses and with a flinty sound in his voice said, "We will try that again, son." Stewart looked up. He saw the blank stare of the mirrors draped over his father-in-law's large bulb of a nose. "But first let's get some dry clothes on you," Henry said. "And we will change the bandage on your toe and the gauze under your splint."

Stewart left soggy prints on the weathered planks as he padded to the cockpit. His swollen toe protruded from his cut-off tennis shoe and he dragged the unfurled bandage along the dock. He looked at the railroad pattern of black stitches on his toe. "Hope the damned thing doesn't get infected," he muttered.

"Don't worry about infection," Henry said. "This is C-L-E-A-N water up here. You can drink it."

Don't worry about doctor's bills is what you mean, Stewart answered in his mind. He went below and changed to a dry pair of cutoff jeans, his uniform for the summer. He spread the contents of his soaked wallet on the cabin table.

"Eighteen dollars. Is that all the money you got, son?" Henry

walked up to the table and looked at Stewart askance. Henry slapped a fifty dollar bill on the table. "Look at my Becky there," he said in a melancholy voice and picked up a soggy photo from the wallet debris on the table. "Such a sweet smile. Such a sweet kid." He stopped and looked at Stewart and scratched his chin.

Stewart came up on deck as they cleared Northport Harbor. Becky had volunteered to push out the bow, and he did not object. His teeth chattered.

"Sit down here, Stewie," Becky said and patted the white seat cushion. "The sun will warm you right up." She beamed at Stewart.

"Okay, kids. Let's get that chute up!" Henry ordered. Stewart went forward with Becky. They struggled with lines and pole to the tune of crisp orders barked from the cockpit. Twice the spinnaker went out upside down, once twisted, and on the fourth attempt it spread red, white, and purple panels against the blue sky.

They returned to the cockpit and Stewart felt the vibration of the boat under his feet.

"She's picking up speed," Henry said. "Hear that hum? That's the prop turning from the force of the water. It drives the compressor and cools the

plates in the refrigerator. It also drives the battery charger. Pretty neat, huh kids?" He smiled a broad grin of satisfaction. "That's my design."

The speedometer climbed to eight knots. Waves curled from each side of the bow and a small rooster tail trailed from the stern. "What a beautiful cutter," Henry said. "She's almost surfing."

Henry leaned back in his seat behind the wheel. "The location of the mast," he said, "that makes it a cutter. It's farther back. Gives the boat a larger foresail area. Better balance. Steers itself under most conditions."

Henry droned on, while Stewart sat doggedly rooted to his seat. He covered every rig known to man, citing in detail the advantages, disadvantages, and sailing performance of each.

During this long dissertation, the wind had shifted from southeast to southwest. Stewart and Becky were ordered up to make adjustments to the spinnaker lines. The old waves from the southeast were joined by building swells from the southwest. The combined effect of the waves raised the stern of the cutter, sent it in a loop to the right, then a loop to the left, then lowered it into the trough.

The sun disappeared in over-

cast and the color of the water changed to slate gray. Stewart watched the greasy seas criss-cross behind and ahead of the boat. He stared down at the running eggs, burned toast, and charred bacon handed up to him by Becky.

"Good little cook," his father-in-law said cheerfully and scooped yellow and watery egg from his plate.

Stewart sat with fork in hand. The gooey mess of egg, bits of bacon, and floating toast slid around on his plate. The tightness of his stomach inched up. He ran to the rail and was sick over the side.

Stewart finished the sail to Charlevoix in his bunk. He knew they were in the harbor when the motion of the boat steadied. He heard Becky and Henry lower the spinnaker.

"On deck, son!" Henry belated. "This time, you take the wheel. Becky and I will handle the lines and fend off. Don't do a thing unless I tell you!" he said to Stewart with a commanding gesture and motioned him toward the wheel. "Look," he said loudly, "the tachometer is on 1,000 R.P.M. She is ticking over nicely. When I yell, you kick her into reverse. See, we are all lined up. That prop will stop her quick and the torque will walk the stern over to the dock. I'm going to drop

a line over the center post as we go by and Becky will carry a fender forward and keep it between the dock and the boat. Got it?"

"Sure. Sure," Stewart answered with a scowl. "No problem."

The cutter entered the slip at an angle with wind astern. Becky stood on the right side near the bow. She held a large white inflated rubber fender over the side on a line. Henry stood on the left. He lassoed a post in the middle of the slip and screamed out, "Reverse! Hit it!"

"Is that the red or black handle?" Stewart asked in a high-pitched voice. He jerked down the red handle.

"B-L-A-C-K!" Henry screamed.

The diesel roared. The bow plowed into the dock and rose three feet as steel and wood splinters tore along its angled fiberglass. The cutter paused, and slid backwards. The bow pulpit came down on the dock post and tore loose from its deck fittings.

They spent three days in a small hotel near the waterfront while the boat was hauled and patched. A new bow pulpit was fitted and a coat of fiberglass gel was applied to the bow. Henry wrote a check for three

thousand six hundred and fifty dollars.

The boat was launched and they left Charlevoix at six that afternoon. The Coast Guard warned of severe weather. "I have to get back," Henry said haughtily. "No one else can handle that Japanese delegation at the plant."

Stewart went on deck shortly before midnight. Henry had taken the first watch. Sick again, Stewart moaned to himself.

"The lee rail!" his father-in-law screamed. "Not into the wind!"

Too late. Stewart vomited into the wind and it blew back on his cutoff jeans and along the deck.

"Damn," Henry said.

Stewart glanced over his shoulder as he scrambled over the coach roof to the lee side of the boat. He could see Henry urinating over the stern with one leg over the rail. "Never into the wind," Henry repeated in disgust.

Stewart got sick again. When he looked up, the cockpit was empty. "Overboard . . ." he heard from a distance. He looked astern and saw the faint light from the rescue lamp clipped to Henry's life preserver. Then it disappeared. He saw the light again on another wave. Then three more times. . . .

Stewart had gone below and watched Becky sleep, curled up in her bunk. After a while, he had lit a cigarette and gone up to the cockpit. He had smoked the cigarette in the dark and wondered about Henry. Now he had lit another and taken several deep puffs. No one to scream at me if the ashes land on the cushions, he thought. Funny, I don't feel sick any more.

Then he went below and shook Becky. "Your dad fell overboard. How do you call the Coast Guard?"

They heaved to, as instructed by the Coast Guard, and when the rescue vessel arrived each boat started a search. This ain't so bad, Stewart thought as he tacked the boat to port, then starboard, with mainsail set full and engine running at 1,000 R.P.M. I guess this is what Henry calls "motor sailing," Stewart said to himself and his face took on a treacherously cheerful look.

They searched throughout the night and Becky kept station-to-station on the radio with the Coast Guard. In the morning, the Coast Guard mapped out and assigned separate quadrants for search by each vessel.

The water slowly turned silent green in the early morning light. At eleven thirty Stewart

spotted a blotch of orange against the green swells. It was Henry. Unconscious and floating on his back. His ears were underwater. Stewart was contemplating a turn in the opposite direction when Becky cried out, "It's him! His life preserver is torn and he's sinking!"

"I'll be damned, it is him." Stewart pretended surprise. He put the cutter in a slow turn and brought it alongside Henry. It was four feet from the deck to the water, and neither Stewart nor Becky could get a solid grip on Henry, even when Becky leaned over the side with Stewart holding her legs. Becky grabbed a boat hook and snagged Henry's life preserver, but the aluminum pole bent and broke when they tried to lift Henry aboard.

"There's something about this in a book downstairs," Stewart said to Becky reassuringly. "Stop crying. We'll get him up. I saw this when I was sick on the way over." Stewart disappeared below and promptly returned with a blue canvas-bound book. He gave firm instructions in a quiet voice as he flipped the pages of *Chapman's Emergency Procedures*. He backed the cutter a few feet away from Henry. Becky pulled the mainsail from

the mast track as Stewart ordered. Then she hanked the main halyard to the spinnaker pole, fastened the end of the pole to the top of the sail, pushed the boom to the port side, and slipped the sail over the rail. The sail went in a sling from the boom, over the rail, curved underwater, and came up to meet the spinnaker pole which held the top of the sail out from the boat. Stewart brought the boat forward and Henry floated onto the sail. He stopped the boat, cranked up the sail, and Henry rose from the water, cradled in the sail. When Henry cleared the rail, Stewart swung him in and lowered him to the deck.

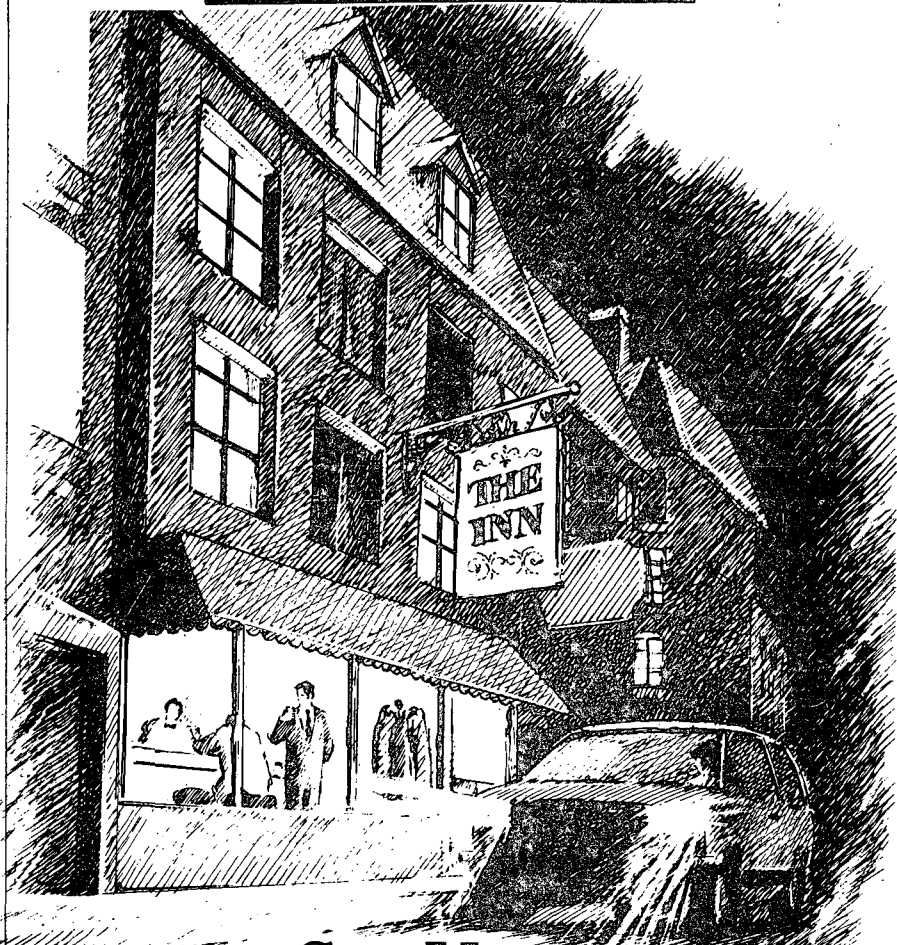
"He isn't dead," Stewart said as he felt a pulse through the carotid artery in Henry's neck. "Heart seems okay. Breathing is okay. It must be shock or exposure." Stewart started a vigorous massage of Henry's arms and legs.

Henry opened his left eye.

"Daddy!" Becky screamed and lifted a radiant face to Stewart. "Stewberry saved your life!"

Henry's right eye opened. He glanced at the sun and looked at Stewart sarcastically. "You're off course, son!" he gurgled.

MYSTERY CLASSIC



Set Up for Murder by Richard Stern

Illustration by Eric Chan

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Even after these first two weeks it was hard to believe that he was here, back in his own office working at his trade, a cop again, instead of a kind of mummy swathed in bandages and plaster, or merely something that had once been a man laid away in a box and buried and forgotten—Carnevan, too tough and ornery to die was the way the department saw it. The department was wrong. He was merely lucky Carnevan, and how much luck could a man count on in one lifetime?

He sat now, and made his notes, and listened to the man across the desk, and made himself go slow and easy, and with care in his questions because that luck was running still, and he couldn't shake the feeling that it was maybe too good to be happening to him. Funny thought; once upon a time it would never have occurred to him.

The man's name was Martin Fallon. Age: thirty-four. Occupation: Construction engineer. Residence: "Park Hotel, I suppose," Fallon said. "I got off the ship yesterday morning. I've been out of the country for four years."

Just like that, the kind of break a cop dreams about. "Go over it all again," Carnevan said. "You were walking, just walking at that time of night—why?"

"It sounds 'silly, I guess," Fallon said. In a rugged, sunburned kind of way, he was impressive enough, a little embarrassed, but determined, and confident, the sort somebody would listen to and believe, somebody on a jury, say. "After four years out of the country," he said, "there's kind of excitement at being back. It's not my city, but it's American, and familiar. I wanted to—wrap the city around me. If you see what I mean."

Carnevan looked at his notes. "You were a block away when you saw the cab pull up to the apartment house, right? And Frankie got out, right? That was his name, Frankie Russo. It means, it meant, quite a bit to a lot of people." Never mind what kind of people, mostly scum. "And the cab pulled away, turned the corner, right? And this other car started up and came by." He paused. "How far away were you then? When the car got to the apartment-house entrance?"

"Maybe a half block."

Carnevan said slowly, "There were how many shots? One? Two?"

"I told you, lieutenant, it was a burst, maybe six or seven shots. It was an automatic weapon. I've been where there was shooting before—the Middle East, and other places. I hit the sidewalk." Nobody, watching, could disbelieve.

"But you took a good look at the car," Carnevan said, "and the two men; you even got the license number, for what that's worth. The car will turn out to be stolen."

"The car went right by me," Fallon said. "The men apparently didn't see me. I tried to do what I could by looking and remembering."

"Go on," Carnevan said.

"As I told you, when the car was gone, I got up and went into the lobby of the apartment house. There was broken glass, but nobody around. I couldn't be sure what had happened, and I couldn't find anybody, so I went on to the Park Hotel and got some sleep. And then I phoned here, and they told me to come around and see you."

Carnevan said, "Frankie made it into the elevator, and the elevator man was scared and slammed the door and started the elevator. He says he could see Frankie was hurt bad and his first thought was to get him to one of the doctors in the building. I think he was just scared. It doesn't matter. He didn't see the car, he says. Neither did anybody else. And Frankie is dead. You're the only one."

"I didn't know that," Fallon said.

Carnevan stood up. "I'll have some pictures sent in. You look through them. Maybe you'll recognize somebody, maybe not. This was a professional job, and they may have been imported talent."

Standing there, watching Fallon's face, it was almost as if he could see into Fallon's mind and understand what was beginning to grow there; and this was funny, too, because in that once-upon-a-time he, Carnevan, would not have comprehended the kind of fear that comes from imagining what might happen.

"I'll try," Fallon said.

Carnevan nodded. "You came in here like a good citizen. We'll take care of you." Walking down the hall to the captain's office he tried not to think about that other time when they—when specifically he—had not taken care of another good citizen.

Captain Long—Willie Long, Dapper Willie—wore a light tweed suit and a button-down collar and a foulard tie, and it was not hard to figure him for college, maybe even Ivy League, and a law degree and brains and a future; and it was a little hard to see him, even years ago, starting out on a beat like everybody else.

"A break," Long said, "and this fast. Sometimes we play in luck, don't we?"

"Luck," Carnevan said, and there was that feeling again.

"Does he know anybody in town?" Long said.

Carnevan frowned a little in puzzlement. He shook his head.

"Somebody," Long said, "who'll put him up, keep him out of sight, under wraps until we need him?"

"He's a stranger," Carnevan said. "We can put him in a hotel, put men on him—" He stopped, and then just sat and looked at his hands.

"Nobody blames you," Long said, "for what happened that time. You couldn't have done any more than you did, getting yourself shot up."

"Except keep him alive," Carnevan said. And then, "All right. We lock this one up? Rough on him, but at least he'll be safe."

"There's a better way," Long said. "We'll give him a break. He deserves it. And this time we'll make sure there isn't any leak or any chance of somebody stumbling over him. He'll drop out of sight. There's a little town up the river, and the local police will cooperate."

Carnevan walked back to his own little office. He was just jumpy, he told himself, and maybe a little tired, too, up most of the night and only two weeks back on the job. He would be as good as ever after a while, the doctors had said; times like this he wondered if it was true, if a man was ever quite the same again after the doubts had been planted in him by the weeks that turned into months and nothing to do but lie in a bed and think—doubts, and fears about how it might be next time, after his luck had run out. He tried to shake that feeling as he went into the office and closed the door.

Fallon had the books of pictures closed. "Their pictures aren't there."

"Okay," Carnevan said. It had been too much to hope for, and yet—

"But maybe this will help," Fallon said. He held out a piece of paper. "Once upon a time I thought I was going to be an artist. Not that it matters. Does this do any good, lieutenant?"

Carnevan looked at the faces, caricatures really, but expressions, even personalities, caught with precision. He nodded. "Good for you." And he could even smile faintly. He put the paper down. "Now," he said, "we know what we're looking for, and we get you out of sight until we find him. Here's what you do. You don't even go back to the Park Hotel—"

Fallon said, "But my things—"

"We'll take care of your things. We don't want anybody seeing

you, remembering you. You understand that?" The jumpiness was gone now. "Don't get hero ideas. I told you these were professionals, and pros don't like loose ends, and you're a loose end, awful loose. One way or another we're keeping you under wraps. If we have to, we'll lock you up."

Fallon looked down at his hands. "What do I do?" He listened quietly, and when Carnevan was done, he said merely, "I guess you know your business." He stood up. He hesitated. "I hope you do, lieutenant." He was gone.

Carnevan picked up the caricatures again and looked at them, but found no identities to go with the faces.

From the doorway, Captain Long said, "Did he give you an identification?" He came in, closed the door.

"Not in the mug books," Carnevan said. "But he did this." He held out the drawing. "We're still in luck."

Long studied the faces. He looked at Carnevan. "Recognize them?" And then, "Neither do I." He did not put the paper down, and he still watched Carnevan's face. "You don't look very good."

"I'm all right."

"No." Willie Long shook his head. "You'd better go home, get some sleep." He held up the paper. "This is routine. I'll take care of putting it out." And he smiled faintly. "And I'll take care of the newspaper guys. They're raising a fuss."

It was funny, but that jumpy feeling was back again, and Carnevan could not explain it. "I'd rather—"

"Beat it," Long said. "You look like death." He walked out.

Carnevan got out of his chair. He put on his hat. A nice guy, Willie Long. The department was full of nice guys. Oh, some weren't, and some, a few, only a handful, really, from time to time, were scum, the worst thing Carnevan could think of—crooked cops. And the crooked ones were all the public thought of, knowing nothing of the pride that was in the rest of the force, the sense of belonging, of knowing yourself a man among good men. There was comfort in that thought. He was tired, that was all the jumpiness amounted to. Bed was what he needed. He hoped that Fallon was following his instructions.

Martin Fallon was in a movie theater, one of the big ones, eating the first popcorn he had tasted in four years. On the screen the film was coming to its end for the second time. "You're safe as long as you're in a crowd," Carnevan had told him. "Walking on a street where there are lots of people, going to a ball game, anything like

that, nobody's going to pick you out. Kill the afternoon that way."

Even then, back in Carnevan's office, Fallon had listened with a sense of unreality that was almost disbelief. That feeling was stronger now, and tinged with resentment. He had behaved like a good citizen and gone to the police with what he had seen. And they had said, in effect, "Thank you very much. Now just abandon your clothes and anything else you may have in your hotel, and any plans you may have made during the last four years, and get yourself lost for the afternoon, and don't argue because we know best."

When the house lights came on and he looked at his watch, and saw it was time, he got out of his seat and walked out of the theater and headed for the station, just as he had known all along he would do. The mobs of commuters wrapped themselves around him like a protective cloak, and it was, somehow, better then. At least he was doing something.

He found the right train with no trouble, and let himself be swept with the crowd onto the dank platform and aboard the nearest car. He found a window seat. Across from him four men set up a bridge game in an efficient way. Everybody else either read a newspaper or talked with his seatmate. It was all so automatic, even amusing, and yet Fallon felt a sudden, unreasoning dread of being conspicuous. Then a girl sat down beside him and opened her newspaper, and the dread disappeared because he was no longer alone.

They came out of the long tunnel and into the area of tenements, stores, signs, some of them in Spanish. Fallon smoked a cigarette and watched the river. The girl beside him read on. When the train made its first stop, Fallon took out his timetable and studied it. The girl glanced at him, smiling faintly. And when, later, the timetable came out again, she said, "Which one do you want?" Mere friendliness. And when he told her, the girl said, "That's mine. You can relax. I could get off in my sleep."

The trip seemed longer than the hour Carnevan had said it would be, but the girl said finally, "This is us." Her paper was already neatly folded. They were together among other commuters down the aisle and out onto the dark platform. "You can walk into town," the girl said, "or take a taxi—"

"I'm going across the bridge."

"Then don't take a taxi. I tried it once. They charge a fantastic fare. There's a bus—"

"I'm being met."

"Then you're all set." She smiled again.

"Thank you," Fallon said. He watched her walk off down the platform, tall, straight, at ease in her daily routine. He walked out to the front of the station.

There were cars parked, most of them with women at the wheel. There were taxis which filled quickly and pulled away. Up the street the bus waited in an area of light and people walked toward it.

And then he saw the car, and he stopped suddenly in the shadows, not really knowing why, feeling merely a sense of wariness. It was not the same car he had seen last night. That was the first thing. But it waited in the same way, without lights, its engine turning over. There were two men in it, their faces merely blurs through the windshield.

Fallon stood quite still, watching the car, while he tried to think, and now the sense of unreality was strong, almost overpowering; and a new feeling began, as of tiny mice feet scampering up and down his spine, sending a prickling sensation into the base of his scalp.

He did not panic easily. Still he stood there, uncertain, feeling the mice feet scampering furiously. And then he turned away, back to the darkness of the platform, walking slowly at first in his hesitation, and then faster. When he reached the platform he began to run, toward the parking area where the girl had gone.

He thought that he had missed her. And then he saw her just getting into her car, and the relief was a warm flood in his mind. He slowed to a walk as he came up to the car window. "I'm sorry," he said. "My ride isn't there. And the bus has already gone."

The girl watched him in silence.

"If you'd be good enough," Fallon said, "to give me a ride across the bridge. I know it's an imposition, but—"

"There won't be another bus," the girl said. "But the taxis—" She stopped there. She shook her head. "I can't wish their fare on anybody." In the light of the instrument panel her face was wearing its faint, friendly smile, a calm face, a strong face. "Hop in."

Walking around the car Fallon let his breath out in a long, silent sigh. He got in and said, "I am grateful."

They bumped out of the parking area and onto the road in front of the station. The car still waited, without lights, and as they passed it the driver's head was briefly in profile. Fallon saw, and tried to compare it with memory—the set of the head; the curious,

intent, almost coiled appearance—but it was futile. It could be the same, but—

"Where are you going?" the girl said.

He answered automatically. "There's a hotel called The Inn—"

"There's only the one hotel," the girl said. "I'll drop you there." She switched on the radio. An announcer's voice worked its way through a commercial. In the little car this was the only sound.

They turned onto the bridge ramp, slowed for the toll station. Fallon held out a bill. "Please." The girl took it, held it out of the window. The radio crackled as the wires in the roadway touched the bottom of the car: "... development in the Russo killing," the announcer's voice said, and Fallon sat stiff and straight in his seat as the voice went on. "An eyewitness has disappeared, police announce. His name is Martin Fallon, and his present whereabouts are unknown. Captain William Long, speaking for Lieutenant Carnevan, who is in charge of the investigation, announced late this afternoon that he fears Fallon may have met with foul play. Fallon left police headquarters early this afternoon, ostensibly to return to his hotel, but has so far failed to arrive. It was only six months ago that another eyewitness to a gangland killing, Peter Morris, was shot to death in a New York hotel in a gun battle in which Lieutenant Carnevan, guarding the witness, was wounded. Lieutenant Carnevan has only recently returned to duty. The missing man, Fallon, is six feet tall, one hundred and eighty pounds. His hair—"

They were past the toll station, onto the bridge itself. "Your change," the girl said. And then, "What's wrong?"

Fallon sat quite still. The announcer's voice went on, telling of trouble in Algeria now. "Are you sick?" the girl said.

He shook his head dumbly. Why? Carnevan knew where he was. Carnevan had given him the instructions, precise instructions. Carnevan. . . .

Carnevan came out of the bedroom of the little apartment, wearing only the bottoms of his pajamas, yawning still. Clara was in front of the television, her long legs tucked beneath her. She sat up, all in one long smooth movement, and switched the set off. "Feel better?"

"I'm fine," Carnevan said. "How long did I sleep?"

"Three, four hours." There was something in her voice, but he failed to catch it.

"Funny," Carnevan said, and added no more. In that once-upon-a-time, one hour, two hours of sleep at the most, and he had been fit and ready again if it was necessary, maybe a little edgier than usual, but alert. Now he felt merely dragged-out by the sleep, and the jumpiness had not left him. Clara's eyes were on him, but avoiding his face. "What're you staring at?" Carnevan said. And then, "Oh." And he looked down at himself, at the scars, still reddish purple, ugly; but nothing, really, compared with the scar on his back where one of the bullets had come out. "I should have put on the pajama coat. Sorry, baby."

"I've seen them before."

"Sure you have, but I don't have to wave them at you."

"Are you awake enough for a beer?" Clara said. "And then some dinner?" This time there was no mistaking the false note.

"No beer," Carnevan said. He sat down, his eyes on her face.

"Speak up, baby. What's your trouble?"

"One of those days, I guess. How about that dinner?"

"Baby." Sharper this time.

She stood silent, indecisive, watching him, no longer even trying to smile. Clara took a deep breath. "It isn't fair. It's not your fault, but the way they make it sound, bringing up—that other time—"

"Make sense," Carnevan said. "What's happened?"

She turned and pointed dumbly at the television set. She took another deep breath. "On the news," she said. "Your eyewitness. He's gone, and they think the same thing happened to him that happened to—the other one. They brought that up, made a point of it. They didn't say that you were more dead than alive trying to protect—"

Carnevan was out of his chair. He had her shoulders in his hands and he turned her, shook her gently. "All of it. Right from the beginning. Fallon's gone where? And what do they think?" He stood there, his hands still on her shoulders, watching her face, listening. And when she was done, he let his hands drop, and then merely stood, strangely shrunken, stunned.

"But it isn't your fault," Clara said. "You were here, asleep. Willie Long told you to go home. They can't blame you. If they blame anybody—"

Carnevan turned away as if he had not heard her. He walked into the bedroom. Clara followed him to the doorway, and Carnevan said, "Make some coffee." He walked into the bathroom and sloshed cold water on his face, combed his hair, which was streaked with

gray now—this, too, a constant reminder that he was no longer what he had been.

Clara was gone when he came out and began his dressing, fast, efficient, the movements of a doctor used to being roused out of sleep; or a cop. And while he dressed he put it all together in his mind, and then took it apart again and started over, but it came out the same way, and here, then, was the root and the cause of the jumpiness, not fatigue or anything else, merely this. Because all along his mind, his inner, cop's mind that continued to function whether he wanted it to or not—all along this part of his mind had smelled something bad right from the first moments in Willie Long's office.

Dressing, he thought of all this, seeing it clearly and objectively. Yet he still half disbelieved it, because only Willie Long could have engineered it this way, and if that was so, that meant that Willie was scum; and worse than scum, a crooked cop, probably crooked for a long time—Willie! It didn't seem possible, but everything pointed that way.

Only he and Willie Long knew what had been said in Willie's office, the decision to send Fallon to the little town up the river. And only he, Carnevan, had talked to Fallon, told him to get lost this afternoon, take this train this evening, get off at this station where he'd be met, go to this hotel.

But now Willie had told a different story to the newspapers and radio and television guys and he was attributing it to Carnevan, too, that Fallon had been told to return to the Park Hotel in the city, but he never got there. So what did it add up to?

There was only one reason for sending Fallon up the river all alone, and then telling the second story. Fallon was a sitting duck for the two hoods in the car. And when somebody found what was left of him, where would the finger point? Why, at Carnevan, who'd sent him there and then told Willie he had sent Fallon back to the Park Hotel. Willie Long could make his own story sound plausible: When Fallon didn't show up at the Park Hotel, Willie would say he got worried and gave out the story to the press guys and put out a thirteen-state alarm, doing all the right things—and who was to say different? Who was to say different?

Not Carnevan, his word against Willie's; Carnevan who had already lost one witness to another killing six months ago. Sure, Carnevan got himself shot up that time, but wasn't it just possible that that had been an accident; maybe that somebody, trying to

make it look good by merely winging Carnevan, had made it look a little too good? What else would anybody think?

And still that inner cop's mind refused to stop analyzing, seeing how it would be. Even if something went wrong up the river and Fallon, by some miracle, managed to get back alive with his story, what then? What would Fallon's story be? He would say, he would have to say, because this was all he knew, "Why, Carnevan sent me up there. I don't know anything about any other police officer. It was Carnevan."

He turned around as Clara came into the room. She had a cup of coffee in one hand. In the other she carried a small package done up in brown paper, and her face was still troubled, but it was puzzled too. She held out the package. "This came just now. A messenger. You expecting something?"

Carnevan took the package slowly, automatically wary. He hefted it. It was heavy, but not too heavy. He held it to his ear, and heard nothing, and the paper felt soft and flexible in his hands and he had never heard of a bomb that felt that way, and why would anybody be sending him a bomb anyway? Still— "Put the coffee down, baby, and get out of here. Close the door."

"No."

"You heard me," Carnevan said.

"No, Carnevan." She moved closer. "Open it."

The string was not sealed, nor attached anywhere that he could see. He worked it with his fingers, slid it off. Nothing happened. He unfolded one corner of the brown paper and peeked. And then he opened the whole package. "Worse than a bomb," Carnevan said, and was unaware that he spoke the words aloud: "Much worse."

Clara's hands just opened and the coffee cup dropped to the floor with a clatter and a splash and she paid no heed. She stared at the package; the pile, thick as a man's hand is broad, of bills, used bills, a twenty on top; and, as Carnevan's hands moved, tilting the stack, fifties and tens and more twenties peeking out.

Clara opened her mouth. No sound came out.

So now he knew for sure; now there was no longer room for any doubt. Carnevan said, and his voice was not quite steady, "It's a frame, baby. I set a man up for murder. I'm right in the middle."

Clara's tongue came out between her teeth, moistened them. "Fallon?"

"Fallon," Carnevan said.

* * *

They were across the bridge now, and the girl turned down the ramp. Fallon still sat silent, numb, feeling the tiny mice feet scamp-ering and the prickling in his scalp, and feeling, too, naked and vulnerable.

It had to be the two men from last night waiting in the car back at the station. It made sense no other way. And yet he still couldn't be sure, because that feeling of unreality would not be denied.

"If you're sick," the girl said, "there's a hospital—"

"No. I'm all right. I was just—thinking of something."

"You had me worried," the girl said. The faint smile appeared again. "Here's your change." She dropped the money in his hand. "The Inn is just—"

"I've changed my mind," Fallon said. "Just drop me off. Anywhere. And thank you for the ride."

The girl was frowning now. "Are you sure you feel all right?"

"I feel rotten," Fallon said. "But I don't want to go to the hospital, and I don't want to go to The Inn. I have to do some—thinking. Let me off anywhere."

The girl glanced at him again. "You're in trouble?"

"It looks like it."

"Bad trouble?"

Fallon said gently, "I haven't done anything, if that's what you're wondering. The funny part of it is just that: I haven't done a thing." And, "Anywhere here."

"Where will you go?"

"I don't know yet."

There was a long silence this time. Then, "I have a house," the girl said. "If you want to think, you can do it there." Where was the harm in that?

Fallon looked at her, studied her. He nodded. "I am grateful," he said.

It was a small house, set back from the road. Two large plane trees seemed to protect it. This much Fallon saw in the glow of the headlights. The girl said, "I wasn't brought up in a city, and unless you are, I guess apartment-house living isn't for you." She was not quite sure why she was talking, except that Fallon sitting beside her was so silent. They walked up the steps. "I tried it," the girl said, "living where I could walk to work, but I missed trees and a garden—"

Fallon said unexpectedly, "I know. I've missed trees too." And that was all. And then they were inside, and he stood by, feeling out of place, an intruder, while the girl stroked the two cats, spoke

to them. The cats eyed Fallon warily.

"This is your thinking room." She walked into the kitchen, the cats following, tails erect. While she fed them, petting them as they ate, she kept her ears tuned to the other room. There was no sound. She stood up at last and walked to the doorway. Fallon was just sitting, looking at the fireplace, and his face, unguarded, seemed younger than before, almost boyish, and bewildered. The girl walked into the room and said, "How is the thinking coming?"

He had a faint smile. "I can't find a place to begin."

"Try the beginning." The girl took a chair, curled her legs beneath her. "Do you want to tell me?"

"I don't know."

The girl said nothing.

"Yes," Fallon said suddenly. "I do want to tell you." And the words began, in all of their disbelief, even incredulity, sounding wild and melodramatic here in this quiet room. The girl listened to the end in silence. "So there was no reason for the radio report," Fallon said, "unless—" He left it there, his eyes on the girl's face.

She shook her head. "You tell me."

"Why mention me at all?" Fallon said. "Particularly, why lie about it, when they know where I am because they sent me here?" He paused. "Unless they're trying to set up a cover, trying to give the impression that I ran away, or that somebody got to me, it makes no sense at all."

The girl said slowly, hesitantly, "You think—what?"

"I think that the car I saw at the station was waiting for me, and that the two men in it are the ones I saw last night." Saying it aloud like this, it was somehow better, easier; not much, but some. "I think that the police sent me up here and told the men where I'd be. They—missed me at the station. Now they'll go to the hotel to see if I'm there." Then, "You don't really believe me, do you?"

"I—don't know."

"Like a bad dream," Fallon said, "and making no more logical sense than a bad dream. It's been like that all day. I don't blame you." He took a piece of paper from his pocket, held it out to her. "There it is, Carnevan's handwriting; which train, which station, the hotel here called The Inn."

The girl handed the paper back to him. "What are you going to do?"

He shook his head, and his hand moved automatically, took a pencil from his pocket, began to doodle on the back of Carnevan's

paper. "I don't know yet." Always he could think better with a pencil in his hand. He watched the lines take shape and form, the same caricatures he had drawn for Carnevan. "Maybe I do know," he said. He stood up. He handed her the paper again. "That's what they look like." And he paused. "Thanks for the ride. Thanks for the—thinking room. Thanks for everything."

The girl still held the paper, looking at it. Then, "Where are you going?"

"It doesn't matter. Forget you ever saw me, picked me up."

"You're going to The Inn," the girl said. "You have to go there before you go to the police, because you still don't know for sure. But if the two men are there, then you will know, isn't that it?"

"Forget it," Fallon said.

The girl was already standing. She said, "I'll drive you to the village, the edge of the village."

"No."

"Where is the harm in that? On these roads you'd wander around, get yourself lost. I know. I've lived here only a few months and I'm just beginning to know my way around."

"You're no part of this," Fallon said.

"I'm not trying to be. I don't—want to be. Maybe that's wrong. I don't know. I'll let you off at the edge of the village and tell you where The Inn is, that's all. Where is the—"

"Just because you gave me a ride—" Fallon began.

"Just because I gave you a ride," the girl said, "yes. And just because you'd been away for four years and wanted to walk late at night and were a good citizen and went to the police with what you saw, and just because you happened to hear the radio." She shook her head. "Funny how things work out, isn't it?"

"Excruciating," Fallon said. He shook his head in slow wonder.

"Shall we go now?" the girl said.

Fallon hesitated. Then, "The edge of the village," he said. "No farther. That's a promise?"

"Promise," the girl said. "I'm no—heroine."

"You know," Fallon said, "I think you're wrong. You are something pretty special."

Carnevan was putting his hat on. Clara said, and her voice was tight, strained, "What can you do?"

"Try," Carnevan said. "That's all there is to do, baby; try to find Fallon before somebody else does." He took out his gun, checked it, put it away again.

"O God," Clara prayed. And then, "Maybe they've already found him. Maybe they haven't." And this was worst of all. "Maybe by the time they get to him, you'll be there too."

Carnevan shook his head, knowing no words of reassurance.

"Let somebody else do it this time. Send somebody. Telephone—"

"There isn't anybody else," Carnevan said. "Not the way Willie's set up the frame. And to the local cops up there I'm just a voice on the phone, a crackpot—"

"Carnevan."

He stopped, turned to face her. He was silent. Between them there had never been lies or even evasions. "I've got to go," Carnevan said. "For Fallon, and for me too. I've got to—find out if I'm the man I used to be."

"You are. You don't have to prove it. You don't—"

"Goodbye, baby." He closed the door gently and trotted down the stairs.

The hotel called The Inn was small and white and old. There was a lobby. There was a bar. The one man waited in the bar with a kind of stolid patience, drawing aimless little circles on the tabletop with one finger. His name was Mark, and he liked beer and city lights. He enjoyed walking alone at night in the crowded streets of the theater district, picking out a face here and there, studying it and thinking, *You, or you, or you—if I wanted to. Right now, here, with everybody watching.* At such times people passing stared at him curiously and wondered what prompted the secret smile.

When Johnny came back from the pay phone in the lobby, Mark merely looked at him and waited, and his finger continued to draw the aimless little circles. Johnny said, "The copper says he doesn't know why the guy hasn't showed. He was supposed to come here. He took the train. The copper's coming up. He'll keep the local law out of our hair and try to see what's gone wrong." He was a smaller man, with quick movements and the tension of a spring kept under tight control. "He'd better," he said.

"So what do we do now?" Mark said.

"We wait."

"Okay. We wait."

"It doesn't bother you a bit, does it?" Johnny said.

Mark looked at him, and shrugged.

"The guy was right there, on the sidewalk," Johnny said. "That's what the radio said. That's what the copper said. And he saw us plain. Right there all the time, but you didn't see him."

"I was busy," Mark said. He liked the submachine gun, its chatter. He liked what it did.

"What a dump," Johnny said. "One hotel. Not even anybody driving by." He paused. "The guy's here somewhere. He's got to be."

"So we wait, like you said."

"At least," Johnny said, "you can knock off drawing pictures on the table. You'll drive me nuts."

The girl drove without haste on the winding road. From time to time she glanced at Fallon's face, finding it, as Carnevan had found it, a face to believe. And yet the doubts remained, nagging at her mind. Stories like his happened, yes; you read about them in the papers. But they happened to other people; people who were, somehow, already entangled. They didn't happen to ordinary people, like herself, like Fallon.

Fallon said suddenly, "What do you do? I mean work?"

She looked at him quickly. "I'm a dress designer for a clothing firm. Nothing exciting."

"I've been away four years this time," Fallon said. "Before that it was three, and before that a couple of years in the army, mostly overseas."

The girl shook her head slowly in puzzlement.

"I don't know anybody here in the States any more," Fallon said.

"Oh," the girl said, and that was all.

"Maybe," Fallon said, "when this is—over." He paused. "I know where you live now." He was silent.

"And you know which train I take," the girl said. "Yes." And a faint smile appeared. "If you want to find me, you can."

"I will," Fallon said, and he looked ahead and saw the lights of the village. "This is far enough."

The girl stopped the car. "The main street runs up from the river," she said. "The Inn is near its foot, a white building—"

"I'll find it."

"The police station is two or three blocks farther up."

"I'll find that too." He opened his door. He got out, and stood there, looking back inside. "Thanks."

"Yes."

"I keep feeling," Fallon said, "that I'm going to wake up any minute. I'm going to feel pretty silly if this is all my imagination." He closed the door and was gone into the darkness.

The girl put the car in gear and started to back around, turning

on the narrow road. And then she stopped, the doubts still strong. After all, what harm could it do, just driving past? And she would never know, otherwise, whether Fallon's story had been real, or what.

She reversed the car's direction and drove toward the village. She turned right on the main street and drove slowly past The Inn. She saw nobody. The lobby was empty, and the café curtains of the bar blocked any view. The Inn looked as old and harmless as it always had.

At the foot of the street she turned around and drove back up, smiling at herself now for even half-believing that here, in this village, big-city happenings could reach out, touch—

There was a man standing at the bar window as she went past this time, and for a moment his face was clear in the reflected glow of her headlights. It was the thinner face of the two sketches Fallon had shown her, even to the tenseness he had caught with his pencil; and the smile in the girl's mind was gone all at once, and there was a kind of sudden emptiness in her chest and in her stomach that was no part of anything but fear.

In the bar, Johnny turned back from the window with a scowl. Mark said, "What's the matter with you?"

"No cars go by," Johnny said. "And then here comes one, headed down for the river. What's down there? And then here it comes back already."

"So what's that prove?"

"A dame," Johnny said. "All alone. Why'd she do that?"

"Who knows?" Mark said. "Who cares?"

"I care," Johnny said. "I can't explain it, so I don't like it. Finish your beer. Let's go."

Mark's face showed mild surprise. "Where?"

"We'll wait in the car," Johnny said. "I don't like it in here."

From the far side of the street, keeping close in the shadows of the building as a matter of rudimentary precaution, Fallon saw the girl's car come back past The Inn, and he stared at it, frowning, too far away to see and recognize the man in the window. He stopped walking and turned, watching the car as it went on by, up the main street past one intersection, two, and then suddenly it swung to the curb, and Fallon saw the girl get out and walk quickly, almost running, into a building where a lighted sign hung overhead.

He stood there, uncomprehending, feeling the mice feet scamp-ering again and the prickling in his scalp. The girl came out after merely a matter of moments, got into the car, and drove away. Then at last Fallon turned back toward The Inn. He was in time to see the two men crossing the street.

This time there was no mistaking them. They walked without hurry, confidently, almost arrogantly, and he watched them until they disappeared around the corner below him, and then he let his breath out in a long, quiet sigh.

If the prickling feeling had been bad before, it was almost par-alyzing now. The palms of his hands were damp. He rubbed them against his trousers, standing there, flattened into the shadows, waiting, watching. The two men did not reappear. Still he stood, and tried to think.

Now he knew. There was going to be no awakening from this bad dream. The police station was up the street, the girl had told him. He looked up the street, seeing all of the lighted areas he would have to pass, seeing—

A red light showed up the street, coming fast. There was no siren. Fallon froze himself in the shadows again. The car went past him without slowing, and he turned to watch. The car swung to the curb in front of The Inn, and both doors opened immediately, and two policemen jumped out and ran across the sidewalk and up the Inn steps. One of them pulled out his gun as he ran.

So that was explained too. The girl, somehow, had seen the men, recognized them, telephoned the police. Now she, too, knew that it was no dream, no wild imagining. Fallon stayed where he was, motionless, waiting, watching, and after a time the two policemen came out of The Inn, got into the car, made a U turn, and drove back up the street, no red light showing this time. Still he waited. The two men did not appear.

Sitting in the car, watching the cops arrive, Johnny said, "So now we know." He was in no hurry. They would wait until the cops were gone.

"Now we know what?" Mark said.

"She fingered us," Johnny said; and he almost, but not quite, not daring, added, "Stupid."

"Who?" Mark said.

"The dame in the car. It has to be that way. She drives past, she drives back. Why, unless she's casing the hotel? That means she's looking for somebody, us. That means she knows what we look

like, me, anyway, or why would she go straight to the cops? That means the guy we're looking for told her what we look like, because he's the only one who knows. That means she knows where he is."

"So?"

"I saw her car," Johnny said. "I'll know it again. When we find it, we find her; and when we find her, we find the guy. Simple as that. A hick dump like this, how many houses are there? We'll find it." He felt better, much better now, the period of waiting over. When the police came out of The Inn and drove off, Johnny started the engine. "Now we're cooking," he said. He swung the car around, away from the main street.

Carnevan pulled in front of The Inn. He walked into the lobby, with one wary glance at the empty bar. This was the starting place; it had to be. The register lay on the desk, and he checked it without waiting for the clerk. No one had registered today. Carnevan looked up as the clerk appeared. "Just help yourself," the clerk snapped, taking the register from Carnevan.

He was cop now, all cop, back in the routine. "Police business," he said. "I'm looking for a man, alone, no luggage, six feet tall, hundred and eighty pounds—"

"Does he have a name?"

"He'll be a stranger to you."

"Can't help you," the clerk said. "Haven't seen him."

"All right," Carnevan said. "Two other men, one big and solid, the other one a little guy, nervous, tight." Fallon had sketched well.

"You and everybody else," the clerk said. "They were here. They left—"

"Alone?"

"Alone. Then Charlie Noble came running in waving his gun—"

"Charlie Noble?" Carnevan said, short and sharp.

"He's one of the local cops. What's going on, anyway?"

Carnevan made no answer. He walked out of The Inn and down the steps to his car. Now it came, and there would be questions from the local cops, lots of questions, because he had no doubt that Willie had done all the right things, put out a thirteen-state alarm, gone through all the motions just as if he hadn't known all along where Fallon had gone. So the local cops would want to know why Carnevan was up here, and why Fallon was supposed to be up here, and just what was going on, anyway? So Carnevan would answer the questions as best he could. There was no other way.

Driving up the street, he wondered by what miracle the two hoods had missed Fallon so far. And he asked himself how long a man's luck could hold. The frame Willie had set up was tight, too tight; heads, Willie won; tails, Carnevan and Fallon lost. The only thing to do was keep punching. There was no other way.

Fallon had waited, but the two men had not reappeared; no car had come around the corner below him. Logic had it then—and he tried desperately to think with logic—that either they still waited, unseen, or they had driven off, away from the law. In either event, the main street, for all its lights, was temporarily safe. And he could not just stand here indefinitely.

He stepped out of the shadows and headed up the street. When he reached the first lighted window, which was a luncheonette, he made himself hold his pace steady, but he could not keep his eyes from the lighted interior beyond the window and the posted menu and a theater bill and a bus schedule, the kind of thing you would expect to find. There was a waitress inside and three kids at the counter, and nobody even glanced at him as he went by. In the relative darkness again he felt he had passed one hurdle.

Two or three blocks, the girl had said, to the local police station. And not all cops could be Carnevans. He would tell them the whole story, ask—no, demand that they lock him up. And then—this new thought slid easily, smoothly into his mind—and then he would have the local police notify the newspapers, tell them that he was here, that he had been sent here, and once the real story was out in the open, Carnevan would not dare to do other than play it straight. He felt better, clasping this thought.

He passed the lighted sign where the girl had gone in to telephone. It was a drugstore. He saw nobody inside. He passed an open supermarket, and a bar, and a small delicatessen. And then he was home free, and a green light burned right ahead of him in front of a stone building with NO PARKING signs at the curb.

The police car he had seen at The Inn was in the white zone and another shabby sedan, both empty. Fallon started up the steps. And then he stopped.

He could see through the window into the battered office, and beyond, to a smaller office, its door open. There were two men in the smaller office, neither of them in uniform. One was a large, sleepy-looking man with a pipe in his hands. He was shaking hands with Carnevan.

Fallon turned away. This time he ran, down the side street, into

the darkness, and the echo of his own footsteps sounded like pursuit.

The man with the pipe was named Johns, Captain Johns, and he waved Carnevan to a chair. "Slow does it, son. We're countrified out here, and you have to spell things out for us." One large thumb rubbed idly at the empty pipe bowl. His sleepy eyes rested on Carnevan's face. "What would two big-city hoods be doing up here? And why would some lady call in and say they were at The Inn, and then hang up? And now you turn up. Sort of gives a man to wonder."

"They're up here," Carnevan said, "because they killed a man in the city. Now they're after the only man who saw them do it. He's up here, too, and I've got to find him."

"No names yet," Johns said mildly. And then, "We have radios up here, son. We even have television. And when a thirteen-state alarm goes out, we usually get told about it. You're talking about the Frankie Russo killing, and a fellow named Martin Fallon who made the mistake of seeing it?"

"Yes. Now can I get some cooperation?"

Johns said slowly, "Offhand, I'd say you were a man pushing himself pretty hard, lieutenant. And maybe not telling me everything I'd kind of like to know. Why would Fallon be up here? He was supposed to—"

"He's here," Carnevan said, "because I sent him here. I—set him up like a duck in a shooting gallery. Now I'm trying to get him off the hook. Now will you—" He stopped. Johns' eyes, still sleepy, still half-closed, were looking beyond him, to the doorway. Carnevan turned slowly. He guessed he already knew what he would see.

Captain Willie Long wore a dark suit now, appropriate to the evening hour, dapper as ever, with a fresh button-down shirt and a different foulard tie. He still looked Ivy League, but with an un-Ivy-League toughness in his face, in his voice. "So you even admit it, Jim?" he said to Carnevan. "You tried to make a monkey out of everybody—me, the whole department?" He paused. "How much did they pay you to pull the switch and send Fallon up here, set him up to get rubbed out?"

In the darkness, around the second corner, Fallon at last slowed down, stopped. He stood, breathing hard, and watched, waited. No one turned the corner behind him; he heard no siren, saw no red

light. He got his breathing quieted down. He tried to think.

Carnevan was here. That meant—he couldn't really know what that meant, except that the local police station was no longer a refuge, but a trap. Carnevan was not stupid. Carnevan would know how to play it if Fallon walked in. Carnevan would say to the local police, "Apparently our boy here lost his nerve and decided to run. He's a material witness. I'll take him back to town with me." Just like that.

And so the police station was out.

His thoughts were calmer now. Fear remained, a steady force, sending scampering mice feet up and down his spine, but fear did not necessarily mean panic. So he stayed away from the police station, from the police—that didn't mean he was helpless. There was still the new thought he had clung to and found comfort in. Carnevan had given out the cover story, a lie, and by that much his jeopardy was reduced. Once it was known that he was here, had been sent here, and was not running, matters would take on a different view.

He began to walk in the darkness, down toward the river, paralleling the main street. He dreaded the thought of lights, the feeling of nakedness on the main street where anybody might see and recognize him, but what other way was there? He crossed the first intersection below the police station. He walked on. It was the next street that came in to the main street closest to the drugstore. And there was a phone there. There had to be, because that was where the girl had gone to telephone the police.

He had a brief thought of the girl, a flicker of admiration that she had done as she had, tried to help even though she had not wanted to be involved. And then the girl was forgotten, and he was thinking of himself again, Martin Fallon, caught in this bad dream that was no dream at all, but reality.

He was sweating when he turned the corner at the second intersection, and began to walk toward the main street. As he walked he rubbed the palms of his hands against his trousers legs, but still they felt damp and cold. He turned onto the main street and walked steadily toward the lighted drugstore.

It was empty. This much he saw with relief. He opened the door and stepped on the rubber welcome mat inside. The chime, loud and clear, sounding in the back of the store, took him by surprise and he almost jumped and turned and ran. And then he just stood and got himself under control again.

The druggist came around the glass partition behind the pre-

scription counter. "Good evening. There is something—?" And then, watching Martin's face, "You are ill?"

"No," Fallon said. A radio played softly in the background, and where there was a radio, there was news. There was a tightness in his throat again, and the palms of his hands were clammy. "I just want to use your phone."

"Of course," the druggist said. "But if you will take my word for it, you do not look quite well. You seem—"

Fallon ignored him and went into the phone booth. A city newspaper, any one of them—he chose a name, looked up the number, dialed it quickly. He expected a little delay at the newspaper switchboard, but there was none. As soon as he gave his name the operator cut him off, and a new voice, a man's voice, came on almost immediately.

"This is Martin Fallon," Fallon said. "I heard radio reports that I'd run, or that—something had happened to me. That isn't true. I was sent up here by the police."

"Where?"

"It's a town called Pearl Valley."

"Oh, no."

The feeling was that of sitting down in a chair that suddenly was not there, of stepping in darkness and finding no stair tread. Fallon said slowly, "That means what?"

"You're the fifth in three hours," the voice said; "all claiming to be Martin Fallon and wanting to know, please, are we interested in taking pictures and writing up a life story. Particularly pictures."

"But—"

"But you're the first," the voice said, "who's dreamed up an out-of-town location. Come on in and tell us about it and we'll see what we can do. Ask for me at the reception desk."

"I can't come in."

"Why not?" And then, "Every cop in town is looking for you, if you're Fallon."

"That's the reason," Fallon said. "They, the police—"

"Oh, brother. You've got it bad, haven't you?"

Fallon hung up then and let himself out of the little booth. The druggist still stood by the prescription counter, and his eyes watched Fallon carefully. Fallon opened the door and stepped over the rubber mat and out to the sidewalk. He began to walk again, compulsively, helplessly, as in a nightmare.

* * *

Johnny drove, up one road and down the next, winding in among the trees, seeing houses, big and little, all shapes and sizes and unlikely locations, looking, always looking for the girl's car.

Mark said, "You know something?"

Johnny was feeling the tension again building within him. The village was larger than he had thought, and the country roads were confusing. Still, if they took their time and were careful, they were bound to win. And the night was young yet. "Okay," he said; "what do I know?"

Mark said, "I bet that dame keeps her car in a garage. Then we'll never find it. You thought of that?"

The girl was in the kitchen of the little house, and the two cats claimed that they were hungry again. They protested that they were famished. "I'm sorry," the girl said. "I forgot." She put more food in their bowls and bent to stroke them while they took the first, greedy gulps. Then she left them and walked out to the quiet living room and sat down.

The fear was gone now, or almost, a more or less momentary thing, springing from surprise. It was still hard to believe that she had actually seen one of the men, that he was real, that he existed—and she glanced at the sketches Fallon had drawn, lying there on the table. She wondered where Fallon was now, with his sunburned face that could be believed and his incredulity that she had shared, and shared no longer.

He would be all right. She told herself this, tried to make herself believe it. And she told herself, too, that it was strange, even a trifle ridiculous, that she should find herself caring much what happened to him. She found both assurances shaky if not downright false.

They had met on the train by accident. She had given him one ride, they had talked a little, and then she had given him another ride. That was all. That was not all. Ships that pass in the night, that trite phrase—but this was different, because they had shared something, an emotion, fear if there was no other word, and after that kind of sharing they were strangers no longer, even though the sharing was past and gone.

She stood up suddenly, finding inactivity intolerable. She walked to the door and threw it wide, stood looking out at the night. The air was pleasant, fresh, cool. Her car stood between the two great plane trees where she had left it in her haste to get inside, to wrap the familiarity of the little house around her—as Fallon had said

he had wanted to do with the city after four years of absence. No matter. The car could sit out. The night air wouldn't hurt it. It was too much of an effort to put it away in the garage. Funny, how tired she was. She thought how tired Fallon must be after a whole day of—running.

Standing there, her hand on the door, looking out at the night, she said, "Please. Be careful. Take care of yourself." It was like a prayer.

In the police station Captain Johns, the big, sleepy man, sat behind his desk, and his thumb rubbed idly at the empty pipe bowl. Willie Long, in his dark suit and his foulard tie, said, "I can make some allowances, but not many." He spoke directly to Carnevan, as if they were the only two in the little office. "You got yourself shot up, and that takes something out of a man."

"Once upon a time," Carnevan said, and the phrase, coming out that way, in this connection, shook him a little, but he went on, "I believed in you. I thought you were a good cop, one of the best. I was proud to work with you, for you." He paused then. "You're scum, Willie. You're worse than scum. You're a good cop turned rotten."

Nothing changed in Willie Long's face. "I said I'd make allowances. I am. Maybe, in a way, it was my fault in giving you the case when I knew that you'd lost something in the hospital. That changes a man. He's never the same again. He has nothing to stand on any longer. He begins to look for the easy way."

Carnevan said, "You're a liar, Willie. You know it, and I know it. You set Fallon up. Did you set up the other one too? Six months ago? In a hotel room nobody knew anything about, where we had Morris on ice, where I slept with the guy and watched him brush his teeth and held his hand when the shakes began? Did you sell out that time, too, Willie? Set him up? Set me up too? How long has the rot gone on? How did it start?"

"I expected this," Willie Long said. He looked at Johns. He spread his hands.

Johns said, in his slow, mild way, "He"—he nodded at Carnevan—"knew Fallon was up here because he'd sent him. Mind telling me—"

"How I knew?" Willie Long said, quick and sharp and smooth. "Of course not. I don't blame you for asking, captain. We got a tip about a package delivered to Carnevan's apartment, and what was in the package—ten thousand dollars." He nodded. "It's true. His

wife had the money, and hysterics. She told us where he'd gone, and why. So—"

It was, all at once, like the breaking of a dam in Carnevan's mind, and the flood was something more than anger, it was rage. His voice shook. "If you touched her, Willie, if you even raised a finger to her—" He backed away, stood beside the doorway. "So help me, I'll kill you. When I'm done here, I'll find you wherever you are—"

Johns said, "Simmer down, son."

"No." Carnevan shook his head. "I can't match him in words. I'm just a cop, maybe stupid. There's a man out here somewhere. I'll find him—"

Willie Long said, "You've gone crazy, Jim. You've—"

"I'm leaving," Carnevan said. "I'm going to find a man." He paused, looking at them both. "You're going to try to stop me?"

Willie Long looked at Johns. Johns' thumb rubbed imperturbably at the pipe bowl. He said, "It's not a very big village, son. There aren't many places to hide, if you want to hide." He paused. "But suit yourself."

Carnevan was gone. They heard the front door slam. Willie Long said, "You'll have him picked up, captain?"

"No rush," Johns said.

"If he finds Fallon—"

"You know about needles?" Johns said. "And haystacks? We haven't even got a starting point. Neither has he."

"He's a good cop," Willie Long said. "He's a smart cop, captain. Don't underrate him." He paused. "I'd be a lot happier if you picked him up. Now." There was an edge to his voice, faint, but there.

"Would you?" Johns said mildly. His thumb rubbed slowly at the pipe bowl. "But you're a little out of your territory, aren't you, son? I'm kind of used to making the decisions up here."

Fallon had left the drugstore well behind. He still walked aimlessly, compulsively, but he had managed to shake a little of the nightmare feeling. Carnevan was here. And the two men in the car were here too. Why did he assume that? They might have gone anywhere. And something began to move around in the back of his mind, and he groped for it, but it was gone. No matter.

He began over. Carnevan was here. The two men were—anywhere. The city, as of now, then, was at least as safe and probably safer than this little village. Carnevan himself had said it. "A city is a fine place to drop out of sight. If you have friends."

He no longer walked aimlessly. A bus or a taxi across the bridge, the girl had said, standing there on the station platform. And somewhere, just recently, he had seen, and not really noticed, a bus schedule posted in a window, a lighted window, one of the places he had walked past—the luncheonette, the first lighted window above The Inn. He began to walk faster.

The newspaper offered sanctuary now, although back in that stifling phone booth, feeling only the shattering disappointment, he had not seen the possibility. Now he did. He crossed the main street almost boldly, and walked straight to the luncheonette window. The schedule was there. It had a pencil line drawn through it, underlining the times of this stop. There were no more buses until morning. He stood quite still, and made himself breathe slowly, evenly. And then he opened the door and walked in.

A jukebox was playing a rock-and-roll song, and the same three boys he had seen before, sitting at the counter, bobbed their heads in rhythm. To the waitress Fallon said, "Can you tell me, please, where the taxis are?"

One of the boys sniggered, but none of them looked around. "One taxi," the waitress said. "This isn't the city, mister. Not after dark. The taxi shack is around the corner on the side street."

One of the boys sniggered again pointlessly as Fallon walked out, but he did not look back. No one followed him around the corner. The shack was there, and an old man sitting on a kitchen chair in front of a microphone, reading a newspaper. He listened to Fallon. "Pretty expensive across the bridge, son. We charge six dollars, have to—"

"I'll pay."

"Two of you go, it's only three apiece."

"I'll pay the whole fare."

"Won't have to," the old man said. "You're lucky." He picked up the microphone, spoke into it. "Where you at, Joe? Fellow here wants across the bridge. Pick up Mrs. Chambers first. She's been waiting."

On the speaker a voice said, "I'll get her. Fifteen minutes."

The old man leaned back in his chair. "There you are, son. Big-city service."

"I'll wait outside," Fallon said. He felt better, much better. Standing in the darkness, almost calm now, he figured at last he had it made.

Carnevan was in his car, and the rage had settled down, steadied

itself. He had driven around one block and back onto the main street where he could keep an eye on the police station. No one had come out yet, but he figured it would not be long before Willie stirred the big, sleepy police captain into action, and orders went out to pick Carnevan up. Carnevan knew how Willie's mind worked, and he had seen Willie operate before. What Willie wanted, Willie got, whether it was wheedling, or needling, or just plain violence it took.

And while he sat there, that inner cop's mind of his kept grinding away at the work it knew best, sifting and sorting, snuffling here and there among piles of maybe unrelated facts.

Fallon was here, right? That was the starting place. It had to be. Okay. The two hoods had been waiting at The Inn, right? They had left, and the cops had come running in, right? Some woman had phoned the local cops. That was why the cops had gone to The Inn, because the woman had said the two hoods were there. Okay. What did that add up to?

The woman—he had no idea who she was and neither did the cops—had to know who the hoods were before she phoned the cops, didn't she? Why else would she have phoned? Right? He was unaware that his hands were moving softly on the steering wheel, that his shoulders were beginning to hunch a little, all of this in tune with the probing, snuffling thoughts. The woman somehow knew Fallon, and that was how she recognized the hoods. Okay.

She saw them at the hotel, right? His hands were moving a little faster now on the smooth plastic of the steering wheel. His shoulders hunched a trifle farther. Okay. She wants to phone the cops. Where does she phone? Not the hotel; the pay phone was right in the lobby, and if she knew who the hoods were she wouldn't dare use that phone, right? So where does she go? And he turned his head only slightly and looked in the rear view mirror back down the main street in the direction of The Inn. Four, five places open, showing lights. How many had phones? She'd pick one close, wanting to get the call in before the hoods changed their minds and walked out of The Inn? Wouldn't she?

His hands had changed their rhythm now, and their movements. His left hand let off the parking brake; his right put the car in gear. He made a U turn there in the middle of the block, headed for the first lighted place above The Inn. If the woman was local, maybe somebody saw her when she came in, recognized her, would remember. It was a long shot. But what else was there to try?

The first place was the luncheonette. Carnevan ignored the three

boys at the counter. To the waitress he said, "A woman come in here, not too long ago, make a phone call, go right out again?"

The waitress said, "What do you think I do here, anyway, mister—" And there was something in Carnevan's face that stopped the rest of it. At the counter all three boys turned and looked, and no one sniggered.

"Well?" Carnevan said. "I'm asking."

"I didn't see anybody," the waitress said.

Carnevan swung his head at the three boys. There was silence. Then one of the boys said, "We've been here an hour or so, mister. No woman's come in."

"Okay," Carnevan said. He walked out. Automatically he looked far up the street. Two cars, the police car and Willie's, still stood in the no-parking area. He drove to the next place. It was a newsstand. The pay phone was out of order. Scratch the newsstand. The two cars still stood in front of the police station, and it passed through Carnevan's mind that maybe the big sleepy cop wasn't quite the hick he made himself out to be if Willie hadn't managed to get him moving yet. No matter. The next stop was the drugstore. Impatience was pushing at him, and his rage, like a banked fire, was smoldering hotly.

Fallon still stood outside the taxi shack in the darkness, still almost calm, but in his mind beginning to urge Joe, who drove the taxi, to hurry, drop his fare, pick up Mrs. Chambers and get down here. And the beginnings of this impatience puzzled him. Carnevan was here. And the two men were—

This time the thoughts stopped right there, and the thing that had been running around in his mind came out in the open where he could examine it. The two men were not just anywhere. They were somewhere very definite. He made himself reason it out step by step, because he had to be sure.

He had seen them crossing the street from The Inn. Why had they come out? Girl drives past, two men come out, police car arrives—*How do you add that up, Fallon? They saw her drive past, and for some reason that made them leave The Inn. Then when the police car came, what would they think, what could they think, except that the girl had called for the police? What else? And if they saw her drive past, they saw her car.* He closed his eyes, opened them again. No matter how he put it together, it came out only one way: *They aren't looking for you, Fallon. They're looking for her car.*

The little house and the two plane trees—the girl had left the car there in plain sight. Maybe she didn't always, but she had once, and she might again, and—

A telephone was his first thought; his second: *I don't even know her name, so I can't telephone.* He fumbled in his pocket, got out a five dollar bill, stuck his head into the shack, and tossed the bill on the old man's table. "My share of the ride," he said. "I'm not going." And then he began to run, off into the darkness, hoping he could remember the roads.

Carnevan stepped on the rubber welcome mat just inside the drugstore door. He heard the chime. He stepped off the mat and back on again, and the chime sounded the second time. The hunch in his shoulders was pronounced when he turned to watch the druggist come out from behind the glass partition. "A woman," Carnevan said. "Came in here not long ago, used the phone?"

"Why," the druggist said, "I wouldn't necessarily notice. There were two or three women, and a man—"

"Anybody comes in here," Carnevan said, "he steps on that mat, right? And you pop out to see who it is, right? If she was here, you saw her." He was reduced to his essence now, everything else wiped away—singleminded, tough, and all cop. "Well?"

"Well," the druggist said, "I don't—" And then, "Yes. One woman did just phone. I remember."

"Better," Carnevan said. "And if she's local, you'd know her, right?"

"I've seen her. She's been in before. But her name—" He spread his hands. "Why do you—"

There was no hesitation in Carnevan. "You fill prescriptions, right? You keep names, records. Okay. You ever fill a prescription for her, this woman?"

It was like watching a coin drop into a slot. There was a little pause while wheels turned, levers moved. The druggist smiled. "You know, I think I did. This summer sometime. The ragweed was bad and she had a prescription for one of the antihistamines—"

"Find it," Carnevan said. And he stood there, hunched, waiting, nothing in his mind but this, the banked fire of his rage smoldering steadily.

From behind the partition the druggist's voice said, "Here it is, just as I remembered it—Chlor-Trimeton—"

"Stop yakking," Carnevan said, "and bring it out."

* * *

Captain Johns sighed. He got up from his desk, dropped the empty pipe into his pocket. "You're a persistent fellow, son. You tend to wear a man down."

"Okay," Willie Long said almost wearily. "You'll pick him up? He can't have gone far. I'll prefer charges, and I'll make them stick. He's—"

"I heard you the first two, three times," Johns said. "I just wanted to study on it a bit." He paused. "You'd better come along, hadn't you, son? He's kind of your responsibility, isn't he?"

"Why?" Willie said. And then, quickly, "Sure. He's my baby."

They walked together out to the police car. Johns looked both ways on the main street. Carnevan's car was pulling away from the curb in front of the drugstore. "Well, well," Johns said. "Isn't it funny how things work out sometimes? He looks as if he's got the bit in his teeth."

"Let's go," Willie Long said.

The girl was curled up in her big chair when the knock came at the door. The cat jumped down from her lap and ran to the kitchen, and the girl smiled after it. "Silly." She walked to the door.

The momentary fear was long gone, and she knew no reason now to be afraid. She was new to the village and she did not know many people, but from time to time someone, usually a woman, came at night to collect donations for this or that—the Girl Scouts, the Boy Scouts, the Cub Scouts, the local church, that kind of thing, one dollar, two.

She opened the door without hesitation. And then she just stood there, and it seemed that the life drained out of her body, and her mind.

"Back up, sister," Johnny said. He held a gun loose in his hand, pointing at her stomach. Behind him Mark wore his secret smile, and his hands cradled the submachine gun as if it were a precious thing. They moved into the room, and she retreated before them.

Mark kicked the door shut. He looked around the room. He walked past Johnny and the girl and into the kitchen. From beneath the sink one of the cats growled, but that was the only sound. Mark came back in. Johnny said, "The bedroom. And don't forget the bathroom, the shower." He did not take his eyes from the girl. "Sit down, sister."

The girl retreated until the sofa touched the back of her legs. Then she let herself go down, and merely sat there, staring. "What do you want?"

Johnny said nothing. He looked at Mark coming back.

"No guy," Mark said. They both looked at the girl.

Slowly she shook her head. "I don't know—anything at all. I mean, I don't know why you're—"

"Cut the jive," Johnny said. "You drove past the hotel. You drove back again. Three, four minutes later here come the coppers running like Boy Scouts. You knew what we look like, sister. And there's only one way you could have known. So where is he?"

"Please," the girl said. "I don't know. I don't know anything."

Mark said, "Hey. Look at this." He picked up the paper with Fallon's sketches on its back. He held it out for Johnny's inspection. "Not bad, huh?" Mark said. "The guy's an artist. How about that?"

"Real funny," Johnny said, and he was looking at the girl again.

"I don't know where he is."

"He was here, right here."

"Yes."

"Keep talking."

It could do no harm now, she told herself. Fallon was gone, and she did not know where, and it was he the two men were after, not she. They would believe her, they would have to believe her. "I drove him to the village. Then he left. I haven't seen him. I don't know where he was going."

"You phoned the cops," Johnny said. "He ask you to do that?"

"Does it matter?" And then, "No. It was my idea."

"So he'd told you all about us," Johnny said. His voice was soft now, and bitter. "A real big-mouth. He even drew funny pictures for you. That's too bad, sister."

"But I don't know where he is."

"That's still too bad," Johnny said. "You should have kept your nose out of it. All the way out." And then, almost petulantly, "Why do squares like you and him have to get in the way? Answer me that, sister."

It was the right road, Fallon was pretty sure. He and the girl had come this way in the car, yes, past this white fence gleaming in the darkness. He was alternately walking and trotting, sort of a scout's pace, keeping up the best speed he could. It wasn't far now, if he remembered right, and with an engineer's eye for land and distance he was confident. There was a sharp blind turn just before her house, a hedgerow of evergreens—and there they were. He picked up his speed, rounded the blind curve.

He could see the girl's car beneath the two great plane trees.

And then he saw the second car, parked a little distance away, and he slowed, stopped, and this time it was panic rising, sharp and bitter, in his throat. He pressed himself against the shelter of the evergreen hedge, and he swallowed once, twice, three times before the tightness in his throat would ease. The bitter taste remained.

The car seemed empty, but he looked at it for long moments before he could force himself away from the hedge. He walked slowly, hesitantly up to the car. It was empty. He stood there looking at the house for a long time, feeling some quality draining out of his mind, leaving him weak, spent.

He didn't even know the girl. She had given him a ride, no more than that. And a thinking place. And another ride. That was the sum total, the entire debtor side of the ledger. And it was she who had called the police, not he, and if the police car had not come to The Inn, the girl would never have been suspect, so she had only herself to blame. He had told her to stay out of it, hadn't he? Hadn't he?

He owed her nothing, really, certainly not—futile heroics. He had come to warn her, but he was too late, and it was too bad, but there it was. He had seen the two men in action, watched their professional thoroughness, their efficiency. There was nothing he could do, except run and hide and hope that they would not find him too. He stood by the empty car, thinking these thoughts through to their logical conclusion.

But logic had no place. The nightmare quality was strong, too strong. And a part of his mind even refused to believe it when he moved away from the car and toward the house, keeping in the shadows, automatically doing this, crouching and rushing silently from shelter to shelter as, once upon a time, he had been taught.

And then he could see into the small living room. The girl was on the sofa, Johnny standing, and, as he watched, Mark came back in, the submachine gun cradled in his hands.

Fallon was still watching when Mark picked up the paper and smiled at it and handed it to Johnny; and it was strange then, the fear remained, strong and bitter in his throat, clutching at his chest, but the fear no longer seemed the important thing.

He was the one they wanted, not the girl. He, Fallon, was the root and cause of everything, drawn in by no fault of his own, but, once in, no longer able to walk away. There was even a kind of calmness in his mind, overriding the fear, stifling it. He looked at the door. He took a deep breath, and straightened, and started for it. And then he stopped. There was maybe a better way. He couldn't

know, he couldn't tell what good it would do—but knowing, telling, were no longer important. There was only trying left.

He dodged back from the house. There was a woodpile; in the lights of the girl's car he had seen it. He found it now in the dark, felt along the even row, chose a club. He hoped the wood was sound. As he turned and ran for the girl's car, his fingers searched the club and found a loose splinter, tore it free. He leaned in through the car window and found the wheel, the horn ring, the crack around the horn button itself. He pushed the ring hard, and the horn blatted. He worked almost feverishly, driving the splinter into the crack, wedging the button in its off-center position. The horn blared on. Crouching, he ran back toward the house. Still the horn blared, loud in the country quiet, jarring.

The little house was suddenly black. There was no sound but that of the horn. Fallon thought he could see the front door opening, something appearing, the white of a face or of a shirt front. And he took a deep breath, and raised his voice in a shout, "I'm here! If you want me, come and get me!"

And he heard the girl's voice raised in a scream, "No! No!"

He was already jumping for cover, crouching, the club firm in his hand, when the submachine gun sprayed a burst, was silent, sprayed another, its chatter loud, vicious. "Not that way!" Fallon shouted. "You'll have to come and get me!" The horn blared on, echoing and reverberating among the trees.

Carnevan drove fast. He was aware of the car behind him, its red light winking, but he ignored it, hunched over the wheel, the banked rage pushing at him.

Willie Long had got to him with those cracks about a man losing something and never being the same man again. Willie had seen too deep, right down into the doubts and uncertainties. Even now, despite the rage, Carnevan could feel the hollowness inside himself, legacy of those helpless months spent just lying and waiting, with nothing to do but think, and learn what fear really meant. Once it had been tough Carnevan, and he had been proud of that toughness. Now, nothing to stand on, Willie had said. Willie had got to him all right. No matter. Find the girl, and through her find Fallon, and what happened after that did not bear thinking about. And then he heard the horn, up ahead, blaring senselessly with an almost hysterical note. It did not stop.

The red light winked behind him, well behind. His own lights picked out an evergreen hedge, dense, impenetrable, and a curve

that disappeared around the hedge. And the horn blared on. He heard a voice raised, but the words were indistinguishable. And then he heard the first burst of shots, and the pause, and the second burst.

His foot came off the throttle. Under compression the car slowed, the sound of its engine dropped to a mere whisper. The horn blared on, and the voice was raised again, Fallon's voice, recognizable, "Not that way! You'll have to come and get me!"

Right up to you, Carnevan, onetime tough cop. How about it? You were lucky once; it was only bandages and plaster and a mummylike stillness, a waiting, thinking, fearing instead of a box lowered into the ground with what had once been a man in it, and the worms patiently moving in. Okay. Now how about it? Can you be lucky again? That lucky? Or will the phone call to Clara this time be different, final? If you try, if you take the chance. Clara didn't want you to come, remember? Think of Clara. Think of everything. How about it, Carnevan?

Ahead, around the hedge, there was only the horn blaring on; for the rest, silence. The red light behind had slowed, but Carnevan was not aware of this. He was aware of nothing but himself, and it was as if he were back in the apartment again, just roused from his nap, standing there in the bottoms of his pajamas and looking down and seeing the ugly red-purple scars on the front of him and knowing that the one behind was worse, uglier, larger, where one of the bullets had come out. *How about it, Carnevan?* Sitting there, sweating now. *How about it? You were a man once.*

He opened his mouth and sucked in a great gulp of air. The horn stopped suddenly, and the silence was loud. "Baby," Carnevan said. It was a whisper, a prayer. And then again, "Baby." His foot bore down hard on the throttle, and the engine lifted its voice to a roar and the car jumped, shot toward the hedge, around the turn, and in the glare of the headlights the entire scene was plain as Carnevan opened his door and threw himself out, landed stiffly, running, the gun in his hand.

There were three figures there on the lawn and gravel beneath the plane trees. Mark was by the girl's car, crouched, swinging, the submachine gun tight in his big hands, with that secret smile fixed on the heaviness of his face. Beyond him, near the woodpile, Johnny and Fallon were caught in a strange tableau, the club raised and swinging in Fallon's hand, but Carnevan had no eyes for them. Mark was the important one, Mark and the chopper in his hands, a sight to turn a man's stomach to lead.

Carnevan snapped off his first shot, still moving, too fast. He snapped off the second as the submachine gun began to buck and jerk and its chattering roar filled the world with sound. Carnevan got off a third shot, stumbled, and fell on his side, his hand crushed under him. And then slowly, in the sudden silence, he struggled to his feet and just stood there watching.

The submachine gun was still in Mark's hands, and he stood, his legs widespread, swaying only a little. His mouth was open, destroying the smile, and his eyes in the glare of the headlights were wide, shining. The gun dropped from his hands, clattered at his feet, and still he stood. And then slowly, gathering momentum as a tree does when it falls, he went down, all in one piece, forward. His head did not turn when his face hit the gravel. His heels came up a little, but that was the only movement he made.

Carnevan looked at Fallon, who still held the club in one hand, and now Johnny's gun in the other, facing Carnevan. Johnny stirred feebly at Fallon's feet. Carnevan's lips were dry, and there was a pain beginning in his arm, his left arm, spreading into his shoulder. He licked his lips and swallowed away the tightness in his throat. His voice came out not quite steady. "You don't need the gun," he said to Fallon. "It's all over." He could feel the blood running down his arm, creeping warmly across the back of his hand. It didn't seem to matter.

Fallon hesitated. He said nothing. He turned away then and walked steadily, purposefully, up to the house. The girl stood in the doorway. "You're all right?" Fallon said. It was a strange voice, tight, somehow warm.

The girl merely nodded.

"Thank God," Fallon said. And then, strangely, incongruously, "I don't even know your name."

The girl's eyes grew wide, round, open-seeming as if their depths were exposed. Her lips moved, lifted faintly, somehow lighting the whole of her strong face. "Is that—important?"

"No," Fallon said, "not important at all." He continued to walk toward her. He dropped the gun and the club.

Behind Carnevan, Captain Johns' voice came, slow, mild. "I'd say you're right, son, or nearly. It's almost over."

Carnevan turned then. He put his gun away. With his right hand he seized his coat sleeve, twisted it hard and held it so, as a kind of tourniquet. He looked, not at Johns, but at Willie Long, still dapper in the dark suit, the foulard tie. Willie's face showed nothing. "You're in trouble," Carnevan said, "aren't you, Willie?"

Whoever got to you, paid you, owns you, isn't going to like this, is he? There'll be others like these." He nodded at Mark, at Johnny, who was sitting up slowly now, one hand to his head. "They'll have your name on the list, because it'll look like you crossed them up." But he was only talking, accomplishing nothing, because the frame was still tight, unchanged. *Heads, he wins; tails, I lose.* It was a helpless, hopeless thought.

Willie said merely, speaking to Johns, "You'll lock him up, captain? Hold him for me? I'll set the wheels in motion to have him brought back to the city. There'll be a departmental hearing, but there'll be a criminal trial, too, on the bribery count." His face was calm. His voice was almost sad. "It will give the department a black eye, but it can't be helped."

"Scum," Carnevan said. "Worse than scum, Willie." He turned around and walked up to the house and inside. He paid no heed to Fallon and the girl, who just sat, at opposite ends of the sofa, looking at each other. Carnevan found the phone, and used it, letting the blood drip as it liked while he dialed.

He almost held his breath until Clara's voice, tense, breathless, afraid, said, "Hello?"

"Baby," Carnevan said.

"Oh, thank God. You're all right?"

"I'm well, baby. Can you understand that? I'm all well." And then, "They've been there? They've—"

"Nobody, Carnevan. Not a soul."

He let his breath out in a long sigh. So Willie had merely been improvising for Johns' benefit. But nothing was changed, nothing. "I'll see you."

"I'll be waiting."

He stood up. He walked back out into the yard to face what he had to face. Johns, large and sleepy-looking, had the empty pipe in his hands. He rubbed at its bowl with his thumb. Willie looked a trifle less dapper, and Carnevan stared at him, wondering at this. Johns said, to Willie, and in the mild voice, "Ever read the Bible, son?" On the ground, sitting straight now, and tense, Johnny watched and listened.

Willie Long said, "Talk sense. What's the Bible—"

"Fellow named Solomon," Johns said, in that slow way. "Figured things out pretty good. Two women both claimed a baby. Solomon sent for a sword, said to cut the baby in half and give each woman a piece."

Willie's face was a study now. Carnevan watched, uncomprehending.

"One woman," Johns said, "thought only about the baby. She was willing to give it up to save its life. She was the mother."

"Very interesting," Willie Long said, "but I've heard the story—"

"Two of you," Johns said, still in the mild voice. "Each one says the other is crooked, set Fallon up to get himself killed. One of you, him"—he pointed with the empty pipe at Carnevan—"spraddles himself trying to keep Fallon alive." He paused. "The other one, you, spends his time sitting arguing with me about Carnevan. You didn't even give a thought to Fallon, son, or what might be happening to him. I gave you all the time in the world, but you didn't give it a thought."

"In a hick town," Willie Long said, "you're probably considered quite a sage, captain. But don't try moving up into the big leagues."

"Not through yet, son." The thumb rubbed imperturbably at the pipe. "Our friend here"—he glanced down at Johnny sitting tense and tight—"rightly belongs to you people. I'll turn him over to you."

He looked down at Johnny. "Two of them," he said. "You'll ride back to town with one. I'll give you your choice, even though I'm not sure you deserve it. Take your time. Think about it. If you ride back with one of them, though, you might not get there. The whole frame's kind of blown up, and a man with a reputation wouldn't want to leave loose ends around, and it's always possible to shoot a man who's trying to escape."

Johnny's face was beginning to lose its sharp outlines. It seemed to be coming apart like a photograph overenlarged. He opened his mouth, but no sound came out.

"Take your pick," Johns said. And Carnevan stood stiff and still, scarcely breathing, disbelieving, really, that Willie Long could be outmaneuvered so.

Willie Long said angrily, "Hick-town tricks. You'll take him in, Jim. And—"

"Kind of changing your tune, aren't you?" Johns said. "A moment ago you wanted me to lock Carnevan up." He looked down at Johnny again. "I haven't heard your choice, yet." He paused. "Or maybe you just don't care, one way or the other. Maybe you figure you've lived long enough. Suit yourself." Slow, calm, pitiless.

Johnny's tongue came out between his lips. It retreated. "Smart, copper, aren't you?" But the defiance just wasn't there. He took a

deep breath. He looked straight at Willie Long. "You're a rat," he said. "And they'll get you. They'll have your name on a list. Your fault, all the way—"

Willie Long turned away suddenly. Nobody spoke or tried to halt him. He walked away, just like that, unreal, impossible. And then he was gone, beyond the glare of the headlights, into the dark, and there was only silence.

Johns looked at Carnevan. Nothing in his voice had changed. "I guess that's about all, son. We'll get that arm looked at. And then"—there was the merest hint of a smile in the sleepy eyes, in the calm face—"you can head back to town with our friend here." He paused. "Shouldn't wonder if somebody's waiting for you?"

Carnevan stood there, holding the twisted coat sleeve in his hand, feeling the dull pain of the arm, but not minding it a bit, hunting for words to say to the big, calm, slow man, and finding nothing but a wonder, growing, spreading in his mind. But there was something else, too, faint, but there—a sense of wholeness, and confidence, and release like a warm comfort. Still Johns watched him, waiting. Carnevan nodded slowly. "Somebody's waiting," he said, and that was all.

SOLUTION TO THE APRIL "UNSOLVED":

Both guides are Rasps; and the three Javelin Throwers are (in order) a Logan, a Rasp, and a Black.

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



Illustration by Sheila Smith

Victoria Silver received raves for her first novel, and her fans will be happy to note that **Death of a Radcliffe Roommate**, her second mystery, reprises the characters of coed Lauren Adler and her very preppie but platonic friend, Michael. When Debbie Doyle is strangled with her own harpstring, Lauren feels compelled to pursue the matter. After all, she was hoping to room during her second year with Emily, the politician's daughter; and Emily is one of the four women who shared a dorm suite with the murder victim. Furthermore, one of the four—if not Emily, then the consummate Valley Girl, Cookie—or the famous poet's protegee, fair Helena—or the fabulously wealthy princess, daughter of an oil sheik—one of the roommates, in any case, just had to be the killer. And how can Lauren choose a roommate with that kind of cloud hanging over her head? I was sure you'd understand; and as you do, then you will probably appreciate Silver's uncannily accurate and devastatingly witty portrait of the self-obsession of privileged college kids attending the most prestigious of Ivy League schools. If breezy, smart, and smart-aleck student sleuths don't appeal to you, then I suggest you pass this one by entirely. But it's your loss. (Bantam, \$2.95, 195 pp.)

In **The Wolf Whispered Death** Dr. Gordon Christy is a young veterinarian from Colorado who agrees to accompany his old friend Sam, a Navajo, to a New Mexico reservation. A white man has been murdered, savaged by what appears to be a gigantic wolf.

Navajo tradition assigns witches the ability to assume wolf form to perform evil, so the inhabitants of Sam's reservation are living in fear and suspicion. Sam thinks that Christy might be able to recognize the tracks, or point the finger to a rabid dog, but the case, it appears, is more complicated than that. Author Barbara Moore has created a very likable protagonist in Christy, and her look at a part of Navajo tribal life is fascinating. (And if you like this aspect of *The Wolf Whispered Death*, you should pick up all of Tony Hillerman's novels.) Moore has also added a couple of intriguing character portraits, and a few very suspenseful scenes. (St. Martin's, \$15.95, 230 pp.)

For those who have yearned for updated versions of the old fashioned "Gothics," I suggest you try **Going, Going, Gone** by Eliza C.G. Collins (Scribner's, \$13.95, 229 pp.). Here is a serious mystery with a fascinating backdrop, the world of antiques dealers in and around Boston. The narrator is Helen Greene, heir to and now sole owner of the prestigious Greene Gallery, a small but very reputable firm. Lots of painful reminders about Helen's past surface one day at an auction: her hopes of buying back a painting that she was forced to sell on her father's death, a painting her father himself had once bought her; her treatment at the hands of the handsome and successful Barton Morley, a man whom the teenaged Helen had been sure she was bound to marry; the pleas and complaints made to her that day about Barton, his callous treatment of her friends among the familiar group of Boston dealers, all of it reminding Helen that Barton was not—had never been—the man she'd thought he was, the man she'd so desperately loved once. Then Barton's body turns up in a trunk that Helen has just bid on and won, and she finds herself passionately investigating Barton's death, driven to open some doors that she'd always been too timid to try. Helen's search for her self-esteem, however, steers her into dangerous waters, and the ending is a surprise.

Gardeners should love reading John Sherwood's latest Celia Grant novel, **The Mantrap Garden** (Scribner's, \$13.95, 186 pp.). Celia is a horticulturist, the owner of a prosperous British nursery. Her busy schedule is her biggest objection to serving as trustee for Monk's Mead, a privately owned and celebrated English garden. But her visit to the place convinces her that there's something terribly awry. The famous gardens, designed by Gertrude Jekyll, are generally untended and even, in one instance, mutilated. Furthermore, the family who owns and tends them seems suspicious and tense, and local gossip is intimating that the recent death of

the chronically ill grandmother might not have been the natural and peaceful one it was assumed to be. The plot thickens, and Celia finds herself required to employ her gardening knowledge as well as her snooping skills to "weed out" the evil.

Gregory McDonald fans should be pleased to learn that his latest, **Fletch, Too** (Warner Books, \$15.95, 294 pp.), picks up the exploits of young Irwin Maurice Fletcher (called Fletch) right after his last adventure (*Fletch Won*). It's his wedding day (to Barbara, his first). A stranger hands him a letter and two tickets to Nairobi that are purportedly an invitation to meet Fletch, Sr., the father Fletch believed lost in a missing plane the day he was born. Thus IMF and his bride fly to Nairobi, but instead of a happy reunion at the airport, young Fletch accidentally witnesses a fatal stabbing from a men's room stall. Then a bush pilot, a crony of Fletch the elder, presents himself and promises to lead the young Fletch to his pater—but only after they first visit the pilot's archaeological digs in the bush and see a bit of the country. I can't reveal more without revealing all. It should be enough to confide that *Fletch, Too* is brimming with all the brash exuberance and witty irreverence we've come to expect of IMF; and McDonald manages, once again, to sneak up on his readers with a trick or two even at the last. *Fletch, Too* is sans sentiment and solemnity, but chock full of wicked fun. This is a sure bet for the adventurous mystery reader.

Last but not least is another offering in the Brother Cadfael series authored by Ellis Peters. **The Raven in the Foregate** (Morrow, \$15.95, 201 pp.) refers to Ailnoth, the new young priest assigned to the parish adjoining the monastery in which Cadfael resides. The time is the Middle Ages; the locale is rural England, close to the border of Wales. The politics are tumultuous as two powerful claimants to the throne wage their long-running war; and in the center of it is young Benet, a spy for the Empress Maude caught in territory now turned back to King Stephen. Benet arrives with Ailnoth's housekeeper and is put to work in the gardens and herbarium with Cadfael, who quickly noses out his apprentice's real identity. The boy's position is fairly secure until Ailnoth—a hard man who has quickly managed to become an object of hate and fear in the neighborhood—is found struck down, apparently a victim of violence. And now Benet, much to the horror of his secret betrothed, is in danger of being hanged as a felon. As always, Peters has competently plotted her tale, blending historical detail with Cadfael's investigative methods, and spicing the broth with a dash of romance and sentiment.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by Peter Shaw



In **The Bedroom Window** an innocent bystander is slowly but inexorably involved in the aftermath of a violent crime. He has just brought home the attractive, errant wife of his boss (played by Isabelle Huppert) for a sexual encounter. When a man starts to assault a young woman just below the bedroom window, Huppert, who is alone for the moment, is attracted by her cries for help. Noisily forcing open the stuck bedroom window, she frightens the man away—but not before getting a good look at him. The only other witness, the victim, was attacked from behind and so never saw her attacker.

The next day the young man learns that soon after the incident another young woman was assaulted, raped, and murdered a few blocks away. Was the killer the man seen by Isabelle Huppert? If so, then she alone is in a position to help identify

the murderer—at the expense of a personal scandal. What to do? Huppert's description of the man is vivid enough to provide a strong lead for the police: between twenty and twenty-four years of age, about six feet tall, red hair combed in a duck tail, preternaturally pale, white skin. Why not have the young man tell the police that he himself saw all this, then bow out and let them pursue the case?

The answer, as the movie goes on to demonstrate, is that such a deception can lead to complications with life-and-death consequences. What is the young man to do when he is unexpectedly asked to identify the perpetrator in a lineup of redheaded men? His paramour's description points almost certainly to the one second from the right, but how can he presume to accuse him of murder?

Yet this is only the beginning

of the complications that ensnare both the false witness who comes forward and the true witness he is protecting. Eventually the young woman who was attacked under the window comes back into the picture. Played with wit and charm by Elizabeth McGovern, she is a resourceful, independent, sassy barmaid. When McGovern teams with the young man to stalk the assault and murder suspect, who soon turns on his pursuers, *The Bedroom Window* shifts from mystery to thriller. At the same time the young man, played by Steve Guttenberg, convincingly shifts from his sexual interest in Huppert to true love for McGovern.

Hitchcock's *The Man Who Knew Too Much* suggests itself as a possible source both for the protagonist who gets caught up in dangerous doings and for two visually stunning scenes in the Baltimore Opera House—recalling the earlier movie's famous attempted assassination in London's Albert Hall. At a deeper level, Hitchcock's feeling for sin and guilt is nicely captured when the young man becomes a murder suspect in the eyes of the police. He is guilty of something, after all, and his behavior shows it.

The Hitchcockian point is underlined in the title of the novel by Anne Holden from which the movie was made. *The*

Witnesses refers equally to the Isabel Huppert character and to the young man. For he is first of all a false witness and secondly a true but undeclared witness to the suspect's nighttime prowling. As for Isabel Huppert, she is initially a true witness, but her veracity becomes problematic when she finally gets to view the suspect and says she can neither identify him nor rule him out.

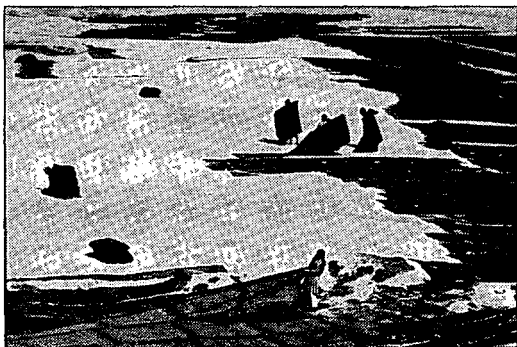
A satisfyingly intricate plot, then, along with top-notch acting, effective use of Baltimore settings, and the judicious introduction of Hitchcockian touches combine to make *The Bedroom Window* a first rate, romantic mystery thriller.



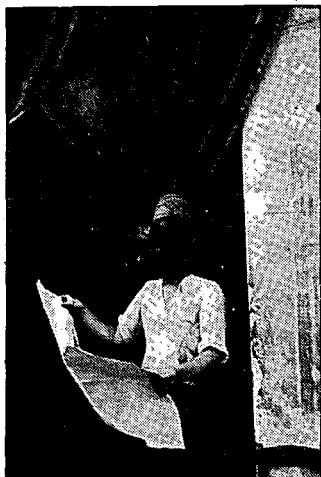
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Isabelle Huppert and Steve Guttenberg
in *The Bedroom Window*.

THE STORY THAT WON



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The Mid-December Mysterious Photograph contest (photos above) was won by John T. Cummings of Chicago, Illinois. Honorable mentions go to Katherine H. Brooks of Portland, Maine; John A. Brosnan of Oradell, New Jersey; Juanita Cannon of Olathe, Kansas; Stephen J. Sommer of Thiells, New York; Rhonda D. Rens of Holt, Michigan; D. Pat Cameron of Minneapolis, Minnesota; James J. Farrington of Colchester, Vermont; Jan Streilein of Johnstown, Pennsylvania; Alois V. Acowitz of Bakersfield, California; M. J. Yancey of Keeler, California; Patricia Hansen of Colville, Washington; G. Frederick Cottle of Toledo, Ohio; and Karen S. Esibill of Baltimore, Maryland.

THE WRONG TURF by John Cummings

Detective Groble dug his hands into his trenchcoat and walked across the frosted dirt paths that scarred the city library's huge front lawn. He quickly made his way up the library steps and inside to warmth.

The detective found Habercorne waiting in the lobby, just as promised. The young investigator stood by the window with a drape wrapped oddly over his head. He held a newspaper at arm's length.

"Habercorne!"

"I didn't think you'd recognize me, Groble. Good detective work."

"Take that drape off your head."

"No way. They might recognize me then."

"Who?"

"The vandals."

"What vandals!"

"Look out the window."

Outside the detective could see the inside of Gumbly Stadium—home field of the Ridge Hill Broncos. The Broncos had beaten the Calumet Clodhoppers again this year to earn an unprecedented sixth straight championship.

"Notice anything strange, detective?"

"No. Just some groundskeepers taking up tarp."

"Exactly."

"Exactly what?"

"No. Exactly who . . . exactly who take up tarp in the middle of winter when the Astroturf needs the most protection. Saboteurs . . . Clodhopper renegades! They plan to pile up the tarp and burn it, ruining the field. They did it last year."

"Are you sure about this, Habercorne?"

"Their jackets read 'Clodhoppers.' From that we can surmise only one thing."

"You mean that . . ."

"Yes. It's not their turf."

"I'll call a squad immediatley." The detective raced out of the room.

Habercorne, with the drape still enveloping his head, thumbed his paper and turned to the sports section.

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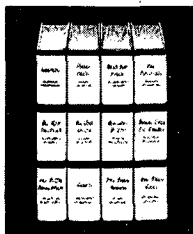
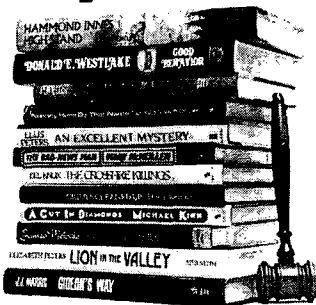
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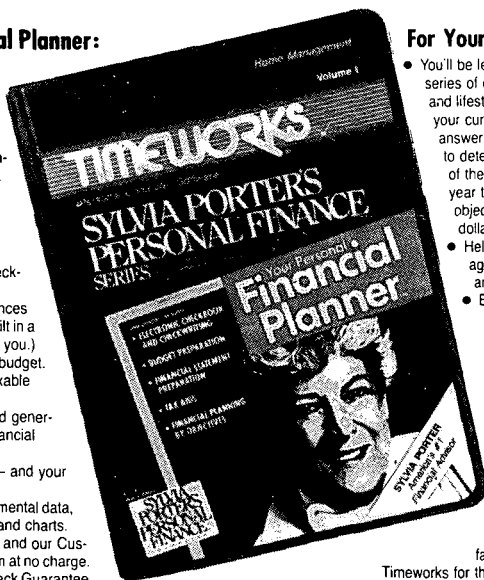
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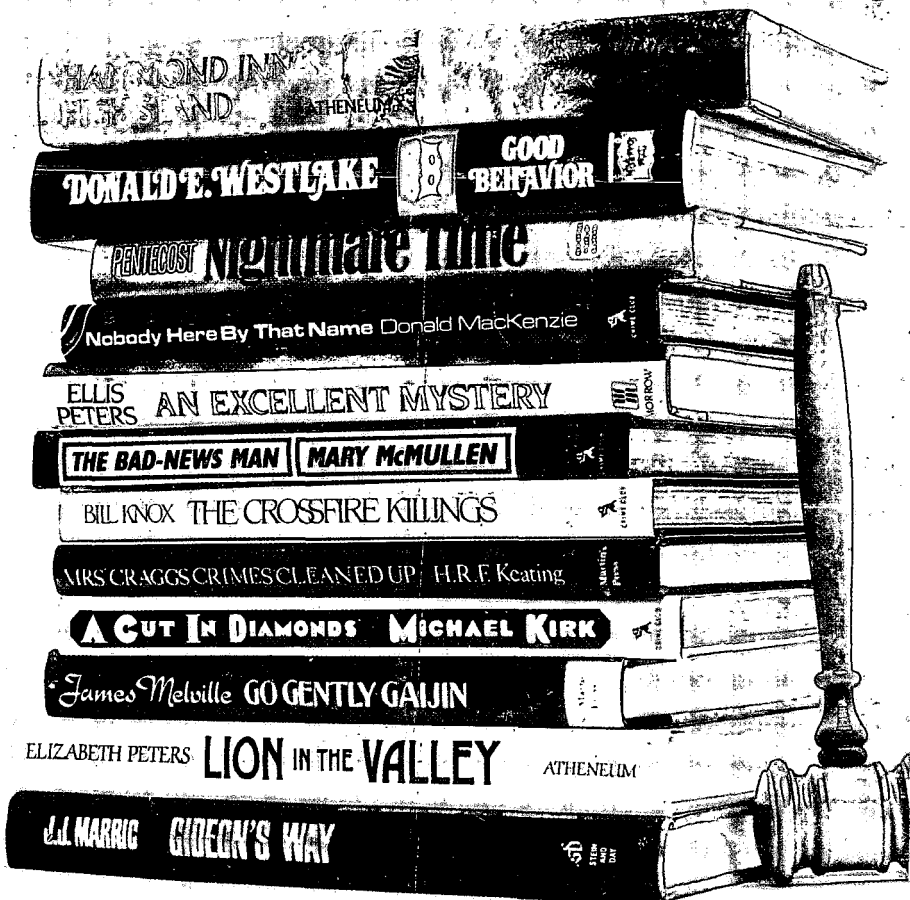
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